

Władysław Reymont

THE PEASANTS

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A. A. K.

PART I

AUTUMN

CHAPTER 1

'Praised be Jesus Christ!'

'For ever, amen, dear Agata, and where might you be off to, eh?'

'Out into the world, good Father, into the great wide world!' She traced an arc from east to west with her staff. The priest glanced unwittingly into that distance and promptly dropped his gaze in the blinding sun, slung low in the west; then he asked more quietly, tentative almost ...

'Have they turned you out, then, the Kłabs? But perhaps just a disagreement ... perhaps ...'

She didn't answer right away, but straightened up a little, casting her faded old eyes slowly over the bare autumn fields and the village roofs, sunk among orchards.

'Ah ... no, they've not turned me out ... course not ... good folk, they are – kin. And there weren't no discord. I saw myself it were time to be off. Better land on your own feet in a puddle than crowd another's cart. It were time ... they'd no more work for me ... Winter's afoot – am I to get a bite for free then, or a corner to sleep? ... And there's the bullock just put from its mother ... and goslings to come in under the thatch with the cold nights upon 'un, so I made room ... it's a shame for the wee animals, God's creatures too ... And they're good folk, they take me in come summer, not begrudging a bite nor a corner – till a body's parading like mistress o' the house ...

'And come winter, it's out into the wide world for alms.'¹

'I don't need much and good folk'll give it me. By Lord Jesus' mercy I'll struggle through to spring, maybe squirrel away a grosz² or two, right handy for them, afore harvest's in ... kin after all. And the good Jesus won't be abandoning a body in need.'

'That he won't!' he cried earnestly and pushed a zloty diffidently into her hand.

'Bless you, Father, bless you!'

She fell at his knees, her head shaking, and the tears spilled like peas down her old face, grey and furrowed as an autumn-ploughed field.

'Go with God now, go,' he whispered awkwardly, pulling her up.

With trembling hands, she gathered her bags and her staff topped with hedgehog spines,³ crossed herself and took the wide rutted road towards the forest, but time and again she'd turn to look at the village, at the fields where they were lifting potatoes, at the smoke of herdsmen's fires drifting low over the stubble, glancing back mournfully until she disappeared among the roadside bushes.

The priest, meanwhile, sat back on some plough wheels, took a pinch of snuff and opened his breviary, but, plunged in autumnal musing, his eyes slid across the red-printed letters, darting instead over the vast landscape or the pale sky, or resting on a farmhand bent over a plough.

'Walek – here – that furrow's crooked!' he shouted, sitting up a little, his eyes now following a pair of stocky mares, step by step, as they pulled the creaking plough.

He began distractedly to scan the breviary's red print again and to move his lips as he read, but his eyes kept chasing first the mares, then a flock of crows hopping carefully about the furrows with outstretched beaks, taking flight at every crack of the whip and every wheeling of the plough, to land again quickly upon the freshly turned ridges, sharpening their beaks against the hard dry clods.

'Walek! Flick the right's behind, she's falling back!'

He smiled to see the right-hand mare pull evenly now, after the whip, and when the horses reached the road, he rose briskly and patted their necks genially so that they stretched out friendly muzzles to sniff at his face.

'*Heet-aa!*'⁴ Walek sang out, and taking hold of the plough, which shone like silver, he lifted it a little, tugged at the horses' reins so that they swung in a sharp arc, pushed the shining coulter into the stubble and cracked the whip. The horses took off so fast the whipletree screeched. Walek ploughed on down a great slope of land that fell away from the road at right angles and ran like long strands of carded ridges all the way to the village, submerged deep among orchards turning red and yellow.

It was a quiet, warm and slightly drowsy day.

The sun still beat down tolerably though it was already late September. It hung midway between the south and west, above the woods, so that bushes and stone heaps,⁵ the pear trees in the fields⁶ and even the hard dry clods cast dense and chilly shadows.

A silence had settled over the deserted fields and a heady sweetness hung in the sunlit dusty haze. High in the pale blue sky, great white clouds were scattered like snowdrifts, blown in and ravelled by the winds.

And below, as far as the eye could see, lay grey fields like a great basin – a basin edged with a deep blue rim of forest and crossed by a river that glittered in the sun like a silver skein as it wound its way between the alders and willows along its banks. Reaching the middle of the village, it swelled into a great long oval pond before escaping to the north through a rift between the hills. At the bottom of the dale, the village was clustered around the pond, the autumnal hues of its orchards shimmering in the sun – like a red-and-yellow caterpillar curled upon a grey burdock leaf from which a long and tangled thread of plots stretched to the forest, strips of grey fields with baulks⁷ roping through, full of pear trees and stone heaps. Here and there, threads of gold spilled through the silvery greyness – lupins yellow with fragrant flowers, the bleached dry beds of streams or sleepy sandy tracks, while, above them, rows of mighty poplars climbed slowly up the hills, stooping towards the forest.

The priest was startled from his reverie by a long mournful lowing somewhere nearby, making the crows take wing with a cry; they lunged across the potato fields – pursued below by their dark fluttering shadows across the stubble and shallow-tilled earth.

Shading his eyes with his hand, he gazed towards the sun. A girl was approaching along the forest road, pulling a big red cow on a rope. She praised God as she passed and made to turn towards the priest to kiss his hand, but the cow jerked her aside and again began to low.

'Off to market with her, are you?'

'Nay ... just to the miller's bull ... Stand still, you pain in the arse ... you gone mad or what!' she cried, out of breath, but the cow dragged her on, so that both girl and beast tore off in a cloud of dust.

Next came a Jewish rag-picker, trudging along the sandy road and pushing a barrow ahead of him, evidently well loaded, since he was obliged to stop now and then, panting heavily.

'What news, Moishe?'

'What news? ... Good news for them that fare well ... the potato harvest is grand, praise God, rye's spilling over, there'll be cabbage. If you've potatoes, rye and cabbage – the news is good!' He kissed the priest's sleeve, adjusted the barrow strap and pushed on, more easily now, from the top of a gentle slope.

Next came a fat mongrel on a string, leading a blind old man down the middle of the road in a haze of dust raised by his shuffling feet.⁸

Then a boy with a bottle flew out of the forest, but spying the priest by the road, he skirted around him from a distance and raced cross-country through the fields to the inn.

Next came a peasant from a neighbouring village, carting wheat to the mill, and a Jewish woman driving a gaggle of geese she'd bought.

And each of them praised God in greeting, exchanged a few words and went their way, with a kind look and a word from the priest, who, watching the sun sink ever lower, got up and shouted to Walek:

'Plough as far as the birches and then off home with you ... or the horses will be fit for nothing.'

And off he went slowly along the baulks, reciting his prayers under his breath, sweeping the fields with a bright affectionate glance ...

Rows of women at work glowed red against the earth ... potatoes rattled as they were emptied into carts ... here and there, ploughs were still out before sowing ... a herd of brindled cows were grazing on the fallow land ... a rust-red brush of young wheat had sprouted down the long ash-grey strips ... white geese dotted the close-grazed ruddy meadows like flakes of snow ... a cow lowed somewhere ... fires were burning and long blue plaits of smoke trailed above the fields ... A wagon rumbled or a plough grated against a stone ... then silence once again embraced the earth, so that the dull babble of the river could be heard and the rumbling of the mill, hidden behind the village in a dense thicket of yellowing trees ... or a song struck up, a sudden shout flew low, knocked about the furrows and hollows, and sank without echo in the autumn grey, on the stubble wreathed in silver webs, on the bare sleepy roads overhung by the heavy, bloodied heads of rowans ... A flurry of sunlit grey dust rose in the drag of the harrows, spread and drifted up the hillside and settled; underneath, as though from out of a cloud, appeared a peasant, bareheaded and barefoot, a cloth tied around his waist. Moving slowly, he scooped seed from the cloth and sowed with a solemn repetitive motion, as if blessing the earth. As he neared the end of the furrow, he collected grain from a sack before turning and slowly making his way back up the slope, so that first his tousled head, then his shoulders and then the whole of him emerged against the sun,

sowing with that same gesture of blessing; with that same holy gesture, he tossed the grain and it fell like golden dust, swirling in a circle to the ground.⁹

The priest slowed, pausing at times to catch his breath, then looked back at his horses again, or glanced at some boys who were showering a great pear tree with stones and who ran up in a mob, hands behind their backs, to kiss the sleeve of his cassock.

He stroked their heads and cautioned:

'No breaking the branches now, or you'll not have pears next year.'

'We weren't aiming at the pears; yon's a rook's nest,' a bolder lad spoke up.

The priest smiled kindly and paused again by the potato diggers.

'God bless your labours!'

'Thank you, Father, bless you,' they replied together, straightening up, and all moved forward to kiss the hands of their dear priest.

'God granted a good potato harvest this year, no?' he said, offering the men his open snuffbox. They dutifully helped themselves to respectful pinches, not venturing to partake in front of him.

'Aye, potatoes big as cats' heads and plenty to a plant.'

'Ah, the cost of pigs will go up. Everyone'll want to be fattening them.'

'Them's dear already: they were dying of swine fever in the summer, and folk have gone as far as Prussia to buy.'

'True, true. And whose potatoes are these you're digging?'

'Boryna's of course.'

'I don't see the owner, so I cannot tell whose they are.'

'Aye, Father's gone off with my husband to the forest.'

'Ah, it's you, Anna. How are things with you?' he turned to a fine young woman wearing a red headscarf, who, since her hands were covered in soil, grasped his hand through her apron and kissed it.

'How's that boy of yours that I christened back at harvest?'

'God bless you, Father, he's faring well, on all fours already.'

'Well, God go with you.'

'And with you, Father.'

And the priest turned to the right, towards the graveyard, which was at that end of the village, beside the road lined with poplars.

They stood without speaking, watching his gaunt, slightly stooped figure as it departed. It wasn't until he'd passed the low stone wall of the graveyard and was walking between the graves to the chapel set among the yellowing birches and red maples that their tongues were loosened.

'There's not a better man in the whole world,' began one of the women.

'Yes indeed, they even wanted to take him off to town ... If Father and the Voyt¹⁰ hadn't gone begging the bishop, then you'd not have him ... But dig now, people, dig. Evening's not far off, nor the last of the potatoes!' said Anna, tipping her basket on to the yellow pile lying on the fresh-dug earth, full of shrivelled potato stalks.

They set to work in silence, so that only the stab of hoes could be heard against the hard ground and the occasional ring of iron on stone. Sometimes one of them would straighten their bent and aching back, sigh deeply, look absently at the sower ahead and dig again, picking the yellow potatoes from the grey soil and throwing them into the basket set alongside.

They were a dozen or so workers, old women in the main or hired hands,¹¹ with two trestles erected behind them and a white sheet slung like a hammock between them holding young children, who would wail from time to time.

'The old woman's gone off, then,' Jagustynka began.

'Who?' asked Anna, straightening up.

'Old Agata.'

'To beg ...'

'Aye, to beg! Ha! To beg, not for fun. She's been slaving for her kin, working all summer long, so now they're letting her go and get a breath o' fresh air. She'll be back in spring, with all she's mustered in her little bags. Bit o' sugar here, bit o' tea there, a grosz or two; they'll soon be all over her, tucking her up in bed, not letting her lift a finger so she can take her rest. Then it'll be "Oh Auntie" this and "Oh Auntie" that, till they've got their hands on her last little coin ... But come autumn, there'll not be a place for her in the hallway or the sty. The scum! Pox-ridden dogs, not kin!' exclaimed Jagustynka with such vehemence that her old face turned livid.

'Just goes to show, it's always the poor that get the wind in their eyes,' threw in one of the labourers, a withered, wry-faced old peasant.

'Dig, people, dig,' Anna urged, displeased at the turn their chatter had taken.

But Jagustynka, who could never hold her tongue for long, glanced at the sower and declared:

'Those Paczes' boys are getting on – the hair's a-thinning on their heads.'

'But bachelors still,' said another woman.

'And that many lasses here growing older or forced away to find places in service ...'

'Indeed, and them with fifteen morgen¹² and the meadow besides, beyond the mill.'

'As if their mother'd let 'em wed ... as if she'd allow it ...'

'Aye, who'd milk the cow, do the washing, mind the house and see to the pigs ...'

'They've got to wait on their mother and Jagusia. After all, Jagna's¹³ a right lady, proper grand ... what with dressing up, always washing, always peering in the looking glass, braiding her hair.'

'And always on the lookout for who to let under the quilt – any strong 'un'll do,' threw in Jagustynka again, curling her lip.

'The Banachs' Józsek sent proposers round with vodka¹⁴ – she wasn't having none of it.'

'Well, I'll ... hoity-toity.'

'And the old dame's always in church, nose in her prayer book, always off to indulgences!'¹⁵

'Maybe, but she's an old witch anyhow. Who made the Wawrzons' cow dry up, ha? And what about Adam's boy, the one who pinched plums from her orchard? She said some evil word or other and straight off he were struck down with the manky plair¹⁶ and then his limbs grew that twisted – Jesus!'

'And God's meant to bless folk when there's that kind in the village ...'

'In the old days, when I used to mind my father's cows, they'd drive that sort out, see,' Jagustynka added again. 'But they'll not come to any harm, they've got those that'll protect 'em.' And lowering her voice and glancing sideways at Anna, who was ahead, digging at the edge of the first turned ridge, Jagustynka whispered to her neighbours:

'And the first to defend her would be Hanka's¹⁷ man ... he sniffs round Jagna like a dog ...'

'Lordy, people ... what on earth are you saying? Heavens! That'd be a sin, an offence against God,' they whispered to each other, digging and keeping their heads down.

'He's not the only one. The boys chase after her like dogs after a bitch.'

'She's got the looks for sure; well fed as a heifer, white skin, eyes like flax flowers ... and that strong with it – there's plenty o' men couldn't handle her ...'

'Well, what's she got to do all day but stuff her face and sleep, how is she not going to look bonny ...'

They fell silent a while, as the potatoes had to be emptied on to a heap.

The talk was but fitful afterwards, touching on this and that, until it ceased, since one of them had spied Boryna's Józka running along the stubble from the village.

She ran up breathless, shouting from a distance:

'Hanka, come on back home, something's up with the cow.'

'Jesus, Mary, which one?'

'The skewbald ... I never ... can't catch my breath ...'

'Lordy, you could have knocked me down – I thought it were mine,' Hanka cried with relief.

'Witek's only just brought her back, the woodsman chased 'em out the coppice.'¹⁸ The cow's done in, she's that fat ... fell down right by the byre and won't drink a drop, won't eat a thing, only rolls about and, Lordy, how she bellows!'

'Is Father not about?'

'No, not back yet. Oh Jesus, Jesus, such a cow too, she'd give a gallon of milk. Come on, hurry up.'

'I'll be there in a flash.'

Anna pulled the child any which way out of the hammock, jammed down his tasselled hat, wrapped him in her apron and stepped lively, so alarmed by the news she didn't even let down her thick apron, completely forgot, so that her bare legs flashed white up to the knees as she took off over the fields. Józka ran ahead.

The diggers, each one straddled over their ridge, shifted along slowly, digging lazily now they had no one to urge and hurry them on.

The sun had already wheeled well to the west and glowing in a great crimson ball, red hot as from a frantic dash, it slipped down behind the tall black trees. Dusk deepened and crept over the fields, drifted over the furrows, skulked along the ditches, gathered in the thickets and spilled slowly over the ground, dimming, engulfing and quenching the colours, leaving only the tips of the trees, the towers and roofs of the church still aflame.

People were beginning to traipse home from the fields.

The sound of human voices, of neighing and lowing and the rattle of carts rang out more sharply in the quietly fading light.

The Angelus bell began to peal from the ridge turret of the church. People paused at the bronze chirruping, and the whispering of prayers floated in the dusk like the murmur of falling leaves.

Cattle were being herded from the meadows with shouts and cheerful singing, raising such clouds of dust along the roads that only a powerful head and thick pair of horns emerged now and then.

Sheep bleated here and there, while geese flew up from the meadows in skeins and plunged into the western afterglow, with only their penetrating cries revealing their whereabouts.

'Ah what a shame, that skewbald were a fine cow.'

'Eh ... at least she weren't a poor man's.'

'Still, it's a shame for the beast, and a waste.'

'Boryna's got no housekeeper – things slip through the cracks.'

'Isn't Hanka the housekeeper?'

'In her own bit o' backyard ... They live like lodgers at the father's, so they've always one eye on what to snaffle for themselves, and the dog can watch out for the father's business.'

'As for Józka, she's no more than a silly chit, so what can she do?'

'Well, why can't Boryna hand the land over to Antek, then?'

'And pension¹⁹ himself to their care, eh? ... You're getting on, Wawrzek, but you're still dead stupid,' Jagustynka began smartly. 'Ho, ho! Boryna's still hale and hearty, he can marry. He'd be a fool to sign over anything to his children.'

'Hale and hearty, maybe, but he's getting on for sixty all the same.'

'Don't you worry, Wawrzek. Any young woman'll have him, he only has to say the word.'

'He's buried two wives already.'

'And he can bury a third, God help him. And while he's living, let him not give the children a furlong, not an inch, not so much as his clog will cover. The scum'd fix him good as mine did me. They'd grant him such a portion he'd be out labouring, or croaking from hunger, or off to beg his bread. Hand over what you've got to your children and see what you get in return: just enough for a rope or a stone round your neck ...'

'Time to get home, people, it's getting dark!'

'It's time, it's time! The sun has set already.'

They quickly gathered up their hoes, baskets and double pots²⁰ and slowly walked in single file, chattering intermittently. Only old Jagustynka railed passionately without pause against her children and then against everyone else.

A girl was driving a sow with piglets in the same direction, singing in a small thin voice:

*'Oh, don't you go near the cart,
Oh, don't you hold on to the axle,
Oh, don't you give a lad a kiss,
However much he asks you.'*

'Hark at that idiot, shrieking like she's being skinned alive.'

CHAPTER 2

Quite a crowd had gathered by now in Boryna's farmyard, which was surrounded on three sides by outbuildings and on the fourth by an orchard that separated it from the road. A handful of women were conferring and exclaiming over the huge red-and-white cow lying in front of the byre on a heap of dung.

An old dog, somewhat lame, his coat rubbed thin at the sides, raced around the skewbald, sniffing and barking. He'd dart at the fence and chase into the road any children hanging on the pickets and gawking curiously into the yard, or he'd run to the sow by the cottage, groaning quietly as she lay sprawled on the ground, suckling her small white piglets.

Hanka ran up, breathless, fell upon the cow and began stroking her head and muzzle.

'Rosy, poor old thing, Rosy!' she wailed and burst into heartfelt tears.

And the women counselled first this and then that to save the cow. They poured salt and water down her throat, or milk and melted wax from a blessed candle; one swore by soap and whey, another urged blood-letting – but they could do nothing to help the cow. She stretched out more and more, lifting her head occasionally and lowing long and painfully, as though for help, until the pink whites of her beautiful eyes grew dim and her heavy horned head drooped with the effort, so that she could only put out her tongue and lick Hanka's hands.

'Maybe Ambrozy can help?' a woman suggested.

'True. He knows about sicknesses,' others agreed.

'Run, Józia. They've rung the Angelus so he must be at church. Lordy, when Father arrives there'll be a row, there will. And it's not any of our fault!' Hanka complained tearfully.

Then she sat on the byre step, put the whimpering baby to her full white breast and listened out, glancing with great trepidation from the heaving cow to the road beyond the picket fence.

In the space of a prayer or two,¹ Józia was back, shouting that Ambrozy was on his way.

Sure enough, an old man soon arrived, of maybe a hundred years or more, straight as a candle, despite his wooden leg and stick. Shaved clean and nicked with scars, his face was gaunt and wrinkled as a spring potato and just as grey. Wisps of hair, white as milk, fell over his forehead and neck, as he'd come bareheaded.

He went straight to the cow and surveyed her thoroughly.

'Oho, it's fresh meat you'll be eating. I see.'

'Can you not help and cure her? Why, the cow's worth three hundred zlotys, and she's just over calving – can you not help? Oh Jesus, Jesus!' Józia cried.

Ambrozy took a flem from his pocket, sharpened it against his boot, examined the edge against the light and cut into an artery under the skewbald's belly – but instead of spurting, the blood trickled slowly, black and foaming.

The onlookers all craned over and watched, holding their breaths.

'Too late! Oho, beast's breathing its last,' Ambrozy declared ceremoniously. 'Must be a pox² or some such ... should have sent for me straight off ... but these wretched women are good for nothing but crying, and when there's owt to do they bleat like sheep.' He spat contemptuously, then went round the cow, looking into her eyes and examining her tongue, wiped his bloodied hands on her soft, shining hide and prepared to leave. 'I shan't be ringing the bell for this burial, you can rattle your pans.'

'Father and Antek!' shouted Józia and ran out into the road to meet them, for a dull rumbling could be heard from the other side of the pond, where the long dark shape of a cart and horses emerged from a cloud of dust that glowed red in the setting sun.

'*Tatulu*,³ that there skewbald's dying!' she called, running up to her father, who was just coming round the pond. Antek was walking behind, propping up the end of the long pine on the cart.

'Stop your idle nonsense,' Boryna muttered, pulling up the horses.

'Ambrozy let her blood but it were no good ... and they poured melted wax down her throat but no use ... and salt but no use neither ... it's the pox for sure ... Witek says the woodsman chased them out the grove and poor Rosy straight away kept stumbling and groaning but he got her back ...'

'The skewbald, my best cow! Devil twist your guts if that's how you mind her!' He threw the reins to his son and, ran forwards, gripping his whip.

The women all stepped back and Witek, who'd been tinkering blithely with something all the while in front of the cottage, leapt across the garden and fled in terror. Even Hanka got up from the step and stood there, helpless and frightened.

'They've ruined my beast!' the old man exclaimed at last, after a long look at the cow. 'Three hundred zlotys into the muck! Always a crowd of scum when the pot comes out, but no one to mind the cow. Such a cow! Such a cow! A man can't stir from his house without loss and ruin on every side ...'

'I've been out digging since noon,' Hanka quietly excused herself.

'Like you ever see a thing!' he shouted furiously. 'Like you have a care for what's mine! Such a cow, such a beast, there's scarce a manor⁴ where you'd find another like it!'

He lamented ever more ruefully as he walked around her, trying to lift her, pulling at her tail, peering at her teeth, but the cow rasped and struggled, her blood ceasing to flow from under her belly and instead clotting into dry black cinders – she was clearly dying.

'Nothing for it, got to finish her off, that's as much as we'll get back!' he declared at last, then fetched the scythe from the barn, sharpened it briefly on the peening jig⁵ that stood under the byre's eaves, took off his spencer,⁶ rolled up his shirtsleeves and set about the slaughtering ...

Hanka and Józia burst into tears, for their roszy cow, as if sensing death, strained to raise her head, gave a dull bellow ... and fell back, her throat cut and only her legs jerking ...

The dog lapped at the blood as it clotted in the fresh air, and then sprang into the potato pit⁷ and barked at the horses standing at the cart by the picket fence where Antek had left them, while Antek himself observed the carnage calmly.

'Stop bawling, you stupid woman. Father's cow's no loss to us!' he said angrily to his wife and set about unharnessing and uncoupling the horses that Witek was already leading to the stalls, pulling them by their manes.

'Many potatoes?' asked Boryna, washing his hands by the well.

'Oh, a fair few – there'll be twenty sacks.'

'They need bringing in today.'

'Oh aye, bring 'em in yourself, then. I can hardly feel my legs nor back ... and the off horse is lame in the foreleg.'

'Józka, call Kuba back from digging. He can hitch up the filly instead of the off horse and bring them in today. It might rain.'

But Boryna was still seething with anger and vexation, for he kept on stopping by the cow and swearing like a trooper, and then strode about the yard, looking in first at the byre, then the barn, then the shed, hardly knowing himself what he was seeking, the loss so gnawed at him.

'Witek! Witek!' he called as he unfastened the broad leather belt from his hips, but there was no sign of the boy.

The folk had all vanished; they understood that such a loss and such chagrin was bound to end in a brawl, for which Boryna was always ready as a rule, but today the old man only swore and went to the house.

'Hanka! Get me something to eat!' he shouted to his daughter-in-law through the open window and went to his own side of the cottage.

It was an ordinary landed peasant dwelling – divided in two by a great hallway running down the middle: the gable end led to the yard and the four-windowed front looked out on the orchard and the road.⁸ Boryna and Józia occupied the garden side and Antek's family the other. The farmhand and herdsman slept with the horses.

The room was already growing dark, for barely any light filtered through the small windows, overshadowed by the eaves and framed by trees, and dusk was falling now, so that only the glass of the holy pictures gleamed, darkening in a row against the whitewashed walls. The chamber was large, but dominated by a black ceiling and the huge beams beneath it, and so crammed with all manner of objects that the only free space was around the great stove with its hood that stood against the wall of the hallway.

Boryna took off his boots and went into the dark storeroom. Closing the door behind him, he pushed aside a board from a little pane, so that the blood-red glow of sunset flooded the room.

The tiny chamber was filled with a jumble of lumber and farm tools. Sheepskin coats hung from poles fixed across the room, alongside red-striped woollen aprons, white *sukmanas*,⁹ whole bundles of grey yarn in skeins, trussed-up grubby fleeces and sacks of feathers. He pulled out a white *sukmana* and a red belt and then searched a long time for something inside the barrels full of grain, and in the corner under a heap of old leather straps and iron, until, hearing Hanka in the main room, he pushed the board back over the little window and again began a long rummage in the grain.

Meanwhile, on the bench beneath the window,¹⁰ the food was steaming; the smell of cabbage and pork fat¹¹ rose from an enormous stoneware pot, with scrambled eggs in a generous bowl beside it.

'Where'd Witek been with the cows?' Boryna asked Hanka, cutting a hefty slab of bread from a loaf, big as a garden sieve.

'To the manor cosses. The woodsman chased him out.'

'The scum, they did for my cow.'

'Aye, she were but a cow, and the chasing wore her out so as she got an inflammation.'

'Damn the beggars. That pasturage is ours, set down in the register clear as day, and they're forever seeing us off and claiming it's theirs.'

'They chased the others off too, and they beat up Walek's boy something awful ...'

'Ha! We should take 'em to court or the commissioner's,¹² Three hundred zlotys' worth, gone.'

'For sure, for sure,' Hanka nodded, overjoyed that Father had been placated.

'Tell Antek to get on with the cow as soon as the potatoes are in. She needs skinning and quartering. I'll help you when I'm back from the Voyt. Hang her from the rafters in the hayloft – safe from the dogs and other vermin ...'

He quickly finished eating and made to ready himself, but felt such heaviness, such a shivering in his bones, such drowsiness, that on rising from the bench he threw himself on to the bed to doze for the space of a prayer.

Hanka went to her side of the cottage and bustled about the room, stopping to lean out of the window to look at Antek, who was eating on the porch outside. Seated at a decent distance from the bowl, he slowly raised spoonful after spoonful to his mouth, scraping firmly against the bowl's sides¹³ and glancing ahead from time to time at the pond – for the sun was setting already, forming gold and purple bands and fiery coils across the water, through which small white clouds seemed to sail like a skein of geese, scattering strings of blood-red pearls from their beaks.

The village began to swarm and buzz with movement; from the road, on both sides of the pond, came the constant rumble of carts raising clouds of dust and the lowing of cows wading into the pond to their knees. They drank slowly, lifting their heavy heads so that thin streams of water trickled from their wide muzzles like strands of opals.

Somewhere from the other end of the pond came the clattering of women's washing paddles and the dull hollow sound of flailing from a barn.

'Antek, won't you chop some logs? I can't manage myself,' Hanka asked, timid and apprehensive, for it didn't take much to make him curse or lash out.

He didn't even answer, as though he hadn't heard. Not daring to repeat it, she went to hack some bits of kindling from a log herself – while he sat silent and cross, exhausted after a long and hard day's work, gazing now at the pond and then at the big house on the other side, its white walls and windowpanes shining in the setting sun. Leaning out from behind a wall, clumps of red dahlias flamed bright against the cottage. In front, in the orchard beyond the fence, a tall figure was moving about, though it was unclear who it was since they kept vanishing on to the porch or between the trees.

'All right for some, sleeping like a squire while you graft like a farmhand,' Antek muttered angrily, for his father's snoring could be heard as far as the porch.

He went to the yard and looked at the cow again.

'Father's cow, sure, but it's our loss too,' he said to his wife who, seeing that Kuba had brought the potatoes from the field, tossed aside her axe and approached the cart.

'The pit's not yet ready, so shift them to the threshing floor,' ordered Antek.

'But that's where Father said you and Kuba are to skin and clean the cow.'

'There's room for a cow and potatoes both,' Kuba murmured, opening the barn doors wide.

'I'm no knacker to be skinning cows,' Antek retorted.

No more was said. Only the rattle of potatoes could be heard, tumbling on to the threshing floor.

The sun had gone down and evening was deepening. The afterglow still shone like clotted blood and cooling gold, scattering the pond with copper dust, so that the quiet waters trembled with a rusty shimmer, rippling sleepily.

The village sank into shadow, into the deep, dead silence of an autumn evening. The cottages shrank as though cleaving to the earth, nestling against the drowsy drooping trees and grey fences.

Antek and Kuba carted potatoes while Hanka and Józka bustled about the farm: there were geese to be rounded up for the night; pigs to be fed to stop them from crowding on to the porch and sticking their greedy snouts into the wooden tubs of water for the cattle; and cows to be milked, for Witek had just brought the rest of the herd back from pasture and was stuffing a handful of hay behind the racks for each of them so they would stand quietly to be milked.

Just as Józka had begun to milk the first in line, Witek climbed out from behind the manger and asked quietly and fearfully:

'Józka, is the master in a fury?'

'Jesus, he'll skin you, you wretch, skin you alive ... he were railing like anything,' she said, turning her head to the light and shielding her face with her hand as the cow flicked her tail, brushing off the flies.

'But ... how's it my fault ... but ... the woodsman chased me and would've thrashed me with his stick, only I scarpered and straight off the skewbald starts trying to lie down and mooring and groaning so I drove her home ...'

He fell silent, but you could hear his quiet, downcast sniffing and snivelling.

'Witek ... don't bleat like a calf – won't be the first time Father's given you a hiding, will it?'

'You bet it won't, but I'm still scared stiff ... I can't stand being beaten ...'

'You silly, a great big lad and he's scared ... I'll explain to *Tato* ...'

'Will you, Józka?' he cried happily. 'It were the woodsman chased us out, me and the cows, see ...'

'I'll tell him, Witek, just stop being a scaredy-cat!'

'Here then ... take this bird!' he whispered, pleased, and pulled out a wooden marvel. 'Just watch how it moves.'

He placed it on the step of the byre, wound it up, and the bird began to totter, lift its long legs and waddle ...

'A storkie! Why it moves like it's alive!' she exclaimed, astonished. Setting aside the milking pail, she crouched by the step and watched with the greatest delight and amazement.

'Jesus! You're a proper mechanic! And it's doing that on its own, eh?'

'On its own, Józka. I just wind it and off it goes for a walk like the master after dinner – see ...' He turned it over and the bird, at once grave and comical, stepped forward, raising its neck and long legs at the same time.

They began to laugh heartily, amused by its antics, while Józka gazed at the boy from time to time, her eyes full of surprise and astonishment.

'Józka!' came Boryna's voice from in front of the cottage.

'What?' she shouted.

'Over here.'

'I'm still milking the cow.'

'Watch the place, I'm away to the Voyt,' he said, poking his head into the dark byre. 'No sign of that foundling, eh?'

'Witek? Nay, he went off for potatoes with Antek, seeing as Kuba had to chop hay for the horses,' she answered quickly and a little nervously, for Witek had squatted down in fright behind her.

'Scum of a boy, good-for-nothing, ruining such a cow,' he muttered, returning to the cottage. He put on a new white capote,¹⁴ its seams all trimmed in black ribbon, and a tall black hat,

fastened a red belt around his waist¹⁵ and took the road by the pond towards the mill.

'So much work still ... firewood to collect ... sowing's not done ... cabbages still on the field ... mulch not raked ... ground needs harrowing for the potatoes ... and the oat fields could do with it too ... and now a court case, to boot ... By God, the work's never done and a man's no better than an ox in harness with no time to sleep nor even rest,' he brooded. 'And here's this court ... that filthy baggage ... slept with her, did I ... may your tongue shrivel ... you slattern ... bitch!' he spat in rage, stuffing his pipe with shag and striking a damp match repeatedly against his trousers before lighting up.

Puffing from time to time, he trudged along slowly; every bone ached and the sorry business of the cow kept disheartening and agitating him.

And there was no one to tell and no one to listen – he was lonely as a post. It was all on his plate, all for him to decide, all for him to chase like a dog ... and no one to chat with, nowhere to turn for help or advice ... nothing but rack and ruin ... the lot of 'em like wolves at a sheep ... snapping away, just waiting for the moment to tear it to bits ...

It was darker in the village now, and since it was a warm evening, fires could be seen flickering through the wide-open doors and windows, and the smell of boiling potatoes and sour rye soup with crackling drifted on the air. Some ate in their hallways or simply sat outside, so that their chatter and the clink of spoons could be heard.

Weighted down with vexation, Boryna went ever slower, and then the memory of his dead wife, whom he'd buried that spring, caught at his throat ...

'Oho, nothing would have befallen the skewbald under her eye, God rest her that I think on of an evening: now that were a wife, a proper housekeeper! Aye, a curmudgeon maybe, and a shrew, never a good word for anyone and always at loggerheads with the other women ... but a wife and a housekeeper!' And here he sighed piously in her memory, and even greater regret choked him as he remembered how things used to be ...

He'd come back from work, dog-tired. There'd always be a hearty meal, and time and again she'd slip him some sausage, hidden from the childer ... And how everything flourished! There were calves, and goslings, and piglets ... every fair there'd be plenty to take to town, and always cash to hand, put aside from livestock she'd raised ... As for her cabbage-with-peas – no one could match it ...

And now what?

Here was Antek, bent on pulling his own way, his son-in-law the blacksmith on the lookout for what he could hustle, and Józka? A silly chit with a head full of nonsense still, and no wonder since the lass was barely ten years old ... Hanka flitted about like a moth, forever ailing, and useful as a dog's tears ...

Yes, everything was going to ruin ... the poor skewbald slaughtered ... a piglet had died at harvest-time ... the crows had made off with at least half the goslings! So much waste, so much ruin! Everything slipping through a sieve, slipping away ...

'I'll not give in!' he exclaimed, almost out loud. 'While there's life in these legs, I'll not sign over a single morgen and be pensioned to you lot ... Soon as Grzela comes home from the war, Antek can go farm at his father-in-law's ... I'm handing over nothing ...'

'Praised be!'¹⁶ a voice rang out.

'For ever, amen,' he responded mechanically and turned off the road into a long wide farmstead and towards the Voyt's dwelling, which was set back somewhat.

Lights were shining at the windows and the dogs began to bay.

He went straight into the main room.

'Is the Voyt home?' he asked a plump woman kneeling by a cradle and nursing a child.

'He'll not be long – he went off in the cart for potatoes. Sit down, Maciej; see, that one's waiting too,' she tossed her chin towards the old boy sitting by the hearth: it was the old blind man and

his dog. The red glow from the fireside torches¹⁷ lit up his great shaven face, bald skull and wide-open eyes, clouded white and set unseeing beneath shaggy grey brows ...

'And whence has God brought you?' asked Boryna, sitting down at the other side of the fire.

'From the great wide world, mister, where else?' he drawled in a whining, almost suppliant voice, pricking up his ears intently and pulling out his snuffbox. 'Take some, mister.'

Boryna helped himself liberally and sneezed three times in a row till the tears came to his eyes.

'Strong, dammit!' He wiped his teary eyes on his sleeve.

'To your health. It's from Petersburg, good for the eyes.'

'Come by tomorrow – I've slaughtered a cow, there'll be a morsel for you too.'

'God bless you ... Boryna, am I right, hey?'

'Ah, you recognized me, then? ... Well, well.'

'By your voice and your speech.'

'What news from the world? Are you always on the road?'

'What indeed, m'dears! Good here, bad there, up and down, same as the world over. Everyone screeching, complaining when it comes to giving to beggar or neighbour, but there's always

enough for the grog.'¹⁸

'That's how it is, truth be told.'

'Oho, so many years tramping about this holy earth, you get to learn a thing or two.'

'And what have you done with that urchin who was leading you last year?' asked the Voyt's wife.

'The scum went off, he did, and emptied my bags good and proper ... I had a bit o' money from folk, offerings to take to Częstochowa,¹⁹ to Our Lady. The bastard filched the lot and scarpered! Quiet, Burek! It's likely the Voyt.' He jerked the rope and the dog stopped growling.

He guessed right; the Voyt entered, threw aside his whip and called from the threshold:

'Something to eat, Wife, I'm hungry as a wolf. How are you, Maciej – and what's your business, Granddad?'

'I'm here, Piotr, about that case of mine tomorrow.'

'I'll wait, Mister Voyt. In the hallway if you want – that'll do me – but if you leave us by the fire, seeing as I'm old, then there I'll stay, and if you give us a bowl of potatoes or a slice of bread,

I'll say a prayer for you, or even two ... for a bit o' cash, ten kopecks ...'²⁰

'Sit down, you'll get your supper, and spend the night too if you like ...'

And the Voyt sat down to his plate of steaming freshly mashed potato, liberally scattered with scratchings, and a bowl of soured milk alongside.

'Sit down, Maciej, and eat what there is with us,' the Voyt's wife urged Boryna, putting down a third spoon.

'God bless you. I'm back from the forest, so I've eaten well already ...'

'Oh, take the spoon – it won't hurt, the evenings are longer now ...'

'A long prayer and a big bowl never killed anyone yet,' threw in the old beggar.

Boryna resisted, but the pork fat so tickled his nostrils that finally he sat on the bench and ate, slowly and with restraint, as custom demanded.

The Voyt's wife, meanwhile, got up from time to time to top up the potatoes or bring more milk.

The beggar's dog began to whine and fidget at the sight of the food.

'Quiet, Burek, our hosts are eating ... you'll get some too, never fear ...' the old boy reassured him, sniffing the delicious aroma as he warmed his hands at the fire.

'So, it seems Ewka's made a complaint against you,' the Voyt began, when he'd eaten his fill.

'That piece! Claims I didn't pay for her service. I paid all right, as God's in heaven, and what's more I gave the priest a sack of oats out o' the goodness of my heart for the christening ...'²¹

'She says the child is ...'

'Father and Son! Is she raving or what?'

'Oho, there's life in the old dog yet!' The Voyt and his wife began to laugh.

'An old man's more likely to hit a bull's eye, what with skill and practice!' whispered the beggar.

'She's a lying dog, I never touched her. Tell me another, a baggage like that ... she were dossing by a fence, whining and begging us to take her in to cook and give her a corner to sleep in since winter were coming. I wasn't keen, but my wife that's dead says: "Ah, take her, she'll be useful round the house – are we going to hire help? She'll be on the spot and handy." I didn't want to, there's barely work in winter and here's one mouth more at the pot. But the late wife says: "Don't you bother yourself, she knows how to weave linen and wool, I'll set her to stitching, she'll cobble something together." So she stayed, fattened up and soon got fixed. And as to who kept her company – there's all manner of talk.'

'She accuses you.'

'I'll murder the scum, foul Gypsy!'

'Still, you have to show up in court.'²²

'I will. God bless you for telling me, I only knew about the dues – but I've paid her, and I've witnesses! That poxy gasbag, that beggar! God's sake, I'll not hold out with all these troubles, I will not – my cow's dropped dead, I had to finish her off, there's jobs waiting, and here a man's utterly alone.'

'A widower's like a sheep among wolves,' the old beggar broke in again.

'I heard tell about the cow, out in the fields ...'

'It's a matter for the manor, since it looks like the woodsman chased her out the copses. My best cow! Worth three hundred. It did her in, she were that heavy, her lungs got inflamed, so I had to finish her off. But I won't let it pass. I'll go to court.'

But the Voyt, who kept close company with the manor,²³ began to reason with Boryna and exhort him to restrain himself, since the first flush of anger always led to bad judgement, and finally, in order to turn the conversation in another direction, he winked at his wife and said:

'Well, Maciej, you should marry again and there'd be someone to mind the homestead.'

'Are you mocking me? Fifty-eight years I marked back at the Assumption. What are you thinking of? My last one's still warm in the grave.'

'Take a woman to suit your age and everything will soon right itself,' the Voyt's wife added and began to clear the table.

'A good wife's a crown for her husband's head,' the beggar threw in, groping for the bowl the Voyt's wife had set in front of him.

Boryna snorted, but pondered suddenly why it hadn't occurred to him before. For whatever woman you settled on, it was always better than struggling alone.

'Some turn out foolish and idle, some are quarrelsome, some are always tugging at the lads' hair, and some are slatterns and flighty for the inn and music, but a fellow's always better off and more comfortable,' the beggar continued as he ate.

'There'd be muttering in the village,' said Boryna.

'Oh aye – and will the village return your cow, or give you advice, or look after the farm, or have any pity at all?' retorted the Voyt's wife vehemently.

'Or prepare a nice warm quilt for you?' the Voyt said with a laugh. 'And the village is that full of lasses, it fair smoulders like an oven when you walk between the cottages ...'

'Hark at him, the old lecher ... that's what's on his mind ...'

'Take Zośka Grzegorzowa, slim, a beauty, and not a bad dowry.'

'What's Maciej need with a dowry, when he's first farmer in the village?'

'Can't have too much of land and goods,' the old beggar protested.

'No, Grzegorzowa's not for him,' the Voyt took up. 'Too young and puny still.'

'What about Kasia Jędrkowa?' the Voyt's wife listed next.

'Spoken for. The Rochs' Adam sent round yesterday with vodka.'

'Then there's Weronka Stachowa.'

'That windbag, flighty and got a buckled hip.'

'What about Tomek's widow, what about her? Still good to wed ...'

'Three children, four morgen, two cows' tails and a mangy sheepskin from her old man.'

‘Wojtek’s Uliasia, then, who lives by the church?’

‘Eh, she’s better for a young man ... she’s got a lad out o’ wedlock, big enough now to herd the cows, but Maciej’s no need o’ that, he’s got his own herdsman.’

‘Oh, there’s plenty more lasses to be married. I’m choosing only ones that might suit Maciej.’

‘You’ve missed out one who’d be a perfect fit.’

‘Who’s that?’

‘What about Dominikowa’s Jagna?’²⁴

‘True, I’d forgotten her completely.’

‘A bonny strapping lass, she can’t climb a fence without snapping a picket beneath her, and beautiful face, white skin, fine as a heifer’s.’

‘Jagna,’ Boryna repeated, listening to the tally in silence. ‘They say she runs after the lads.’

‘They’ve seen that with their own eyes, have they! Tittle-tattle for the sake of it, and all out of envy,’ the Voyt’s wife defended her fiercely.

‘I’m not saying so, but that’s the talk. Well, I have to go,’ he said, adjusting his belt and tamping down an ember in his pipe before dragging on it a few times. ‘What time in court?’ he asked evenly.

‘It’s down for nine in the *povestka*,’²⁵ said the Voyt. ‘You’ll need to be up at daybreak if you’re going on foot.’

‘Ha ... I’ll go along slowly on the filly. God be with you, I thank you for the meal and the neighbourly advice.’

‘Godspeed, and think on our counsel! ... Say the word and I’ll be round to the mother’s with the vodka and we’ll fix a wedding before the Twelve Days are upon us!’

Boryna made no answer, just shot him a look and went out.

‘When an old man takes a young lass, the devil rejoices, for he’ll be the one to profit,’ declared the old beggar sagely, scraping the bottom of his bowl loudly.

Boryna returned home slowly, mulling over their advice. Back at the Voyt’s, he had not betrayed how exceedingly the thought had appealed to him, for he was a seasoned farmer after all, not some boy still wet behind the ears, who almost squeals in anticipation and hops from foot to foot at the mention of taking a wife.

Night had now embraced the earth, the stars sparkling like silver dew in the dark and silent depths. The whole village was quiet, with only the occasional bark of a dog to be heard, and here and there tiny lights winked faintly beyond the trees ... sometimes a damp breeze wafted from the meadows, making the trees sway gently and quietly rustle their leaves.

Boryna did not return the way he’d come, but headed down across the bridge under which the water flowed babbling into the river and tumbled to the mill. He turned and went round the far side of the pond. The waters shone black and still, the trees on the shore throwing dark shadows across the surface of the pond, edging its banks like a frame, and in the middle, where it was lighter, the stars were reflected as though in a steel mirror.

Maciej did not know himself why he hadn’t gone straight home, but chosen the longer way – perhaps to pass by Jagna’s house? Or perhaps to gather his thoughts and meditate a little.

‘Certainly, it would be no bad thing! Certainly! And all they said of her is true enough.’ He spat. ‘A strapping woman!’ He shivered; a damp chill was rising from the pond, and it had been mighty hot at the Voyt’s.

‘It’ll all go to ruin without a woman, or end in handing the farm over to the children,’ he thought, ‘and she’s a sturdy wench, pretty as a picture ... And the best cow gone and who knows what tomorrow will bring? Happen best find a wife? All that frippery the last one left behind – it’ll come in handy. But Dominik’s old widow is a nasty piece ... ah, but she has a house and land, so she’ll stay at her own place. Three of ’em, and they’ve fifteen morgen; that would be five for Jagna and quittance for the house and livestock! Five morgen is exactly the fields beyond my potato field – looks like they sowed rye last summer, yes ... Five morgen with mine ... makes just short of five-and-thirty! A goodly bit of land!’

He rubbed his hands and adjusted his belt. ‘Only the miller’s got more ... that thief garnered it through wronging folk with his interest and his swindling ... and next year I’d cart manure and till and plant the whole lot with wheat. I’d need another horse, and another cow in place of the poor skewbald ... but true, she’d bring a cow with her, she would ...’

And so he pondered and calculated, pausing now and then amid his heavy deliberations, lost in his farmer’s dreams. And shrewd peasant that he was, he mustered every point, racking his brains so as not to overlook anything or let it slip.

‘They’ll kick up a fuss, the louts, they will!’ He thought of his children, but a sudden wave of strength and assurance flooded his heart, bolstering his as yet vague and wavering resolve.

‘The land’s mine – hands off, the rest of ’em! And if they don’t like it, then ...’ He did not finish, for he was standing in front of Jagna’s cottage.

It was still bright inside, a broad beam of light streamed from the open window, across the dahlias and low plum trees, right to the fence and the road.

Boryna stood in the shadows and peered into the room. The lamp was burning above the stove’s hood, but a mighty fire must have been blazing inside, for the crackle of spruce could be heard and a red glow filled the great room, its corners in darkness. Hunched by the fire, the old woman was reading something aloud, and Jagna sat opposite, her face turned to the window; wearing just her smock, the sleeves rolled up to the shoulders, she was plucking a goose.

‘She’s bonny all right!’ he thought.

She would raise her head occasionally to listen to her mother, sigh deeply and return to plucking the feathers, until the goose gave a pained squawk and began to struggle and honk in her hands, beating its wings so that down billowed about the chamber in a white cloud.

Jagna quickly soothed it, squeezing it firmly between her knees so that the goose gave only a quiet and plaintive honk or two and others answered it somewhere from the hallway or the yard.

‘A beautiful woman,’ he thought and departed hurriedly, for the blood had rushed to his head until he scratched at it, did up his *sukmana* and tightened his belt.

He was already at his gate and turning into the farmstead when he happened to glance back at her house, for he was exactly opposite, just on the other side of the water. Someone was coming out at that very moment – a beam of light streamed through the open door and streaked like lightning across the pond, then came the thud of firm steps and the sound of someone drawing water, and finally, across the darkness and mists drifting in from the meadows, a song echoed softly:

‘I’m on this bank, you’re on that bank.

How’s my kiss to reach you?

I’ll send it sailing on a little leaf.

Here it comes, my darling!’

He listened for a long time, but the singing faded quickly and soon the lights went out.

A full moon rolled across the sky from beyond the forest and silvered the tips of the trees, sprinkling light through their branches on to the pond and peering into the cottage windows opposite. Even the dogs had quietened; a deep silence enveloped the whole village and all of creation.

Boryna did the rounds of the farmyard, looking in on the horses, who whinnied and nibbled at their fodder, and poking his head through the byre doors that were standing open in the warmth of the night. The cows were lying down chewing the cud, groaning from time to time, as cattle do. He fastened the doors to the barn.

Taking off his hat, he walked towards the cottage, muttering his prayers under his breath. And since all were sleeping, he quietly took off his shoes and went straight to bed. But he couldn’t sleep: first he was roasting under the quilt, so that he stuck out his legs; then his head teemed with all manner of matters, perturbations, ponderings ... or his full stomach weighed so heavily that he groaned and muttered.

‘I’ve always said soured milk does nothing but swell the belly, why take it at night ...’ And then he began thinking of Jagna; how fine it would be with her so bonny and thrifty and so many fields ... Or he’d recall the children, or the talk about Jagna, so that his thoughts were all a muddle and he hardly knew what to do. He sat up and, as had always been his wont, made to call out to the other bed for advice: ‘Marysia! Should I wed Jagna or not?’

But he remembered in time that Marysia had been lying in the graveyard since spring, and it was Józka lying there snoring and he was a poor wretch with no one to turn to; so he just sighed deeply, crossed himself and set to reciting Hail Marys for the dead woman and all the other souls left in purgatory.

CHAPTER 3

Dawn had already bleached the roofs and drawn a coarse grey blanket over the night and pale stars when the first signs of movement could be detected at the Boryna farmstead.

Kuba dragged himself from his bunk and peered out of the stable – the ground was covered with hoar frost and it was still grey, but on the eastern side the sky was already glowing, daybreak tingeing the tips of the frosted trees red. He stretched pleasurably, yawned a few times and went off to the byre to shout at Witek that it was time to get up, but the boy barely lifted his sleepy head and whispered, 'Coming, Kuba, coming!' before nestling back into the bedding.

'Sleep a bit longer, poor lad, sleep!' Kuba adjusted the sheepskin over the boy and hobbled out, for he limped badly since being shot in the leg and now dragged it along. He washed at the well, smoothing with his palm his sparse thinning hair, tangled into knots, and knelt at the stable threshold to say his prayers.

Inside the house they were still asleep. The crimson glow of dawn caught fire in the cottage windows and the torn rags of dense white mists, lingering over the pond, were slowly rolling away and rising upwards.

Kuba prayed a long time, fingering his chaplet and running his eyes now over the farmyard, then the windows of the cottage and the orchard still in shadow, the apple trees heavy with fruit as big as fists. He tossed something at the kennel by the door, at Łapa's white head, but the dog only growled, curled up and went back to sleep.

'Ha, you'd sleep till sun's up, you beggar!' And he kept throwing until the dog emerged, stretched, yawned, wagged his tail and sat down nearby to scratch and set his dense shaggy fur in order with his teeth.

'... and offer this prayer to you and all the saints. Amen!' Kuba beat his breast at length and, getting up, said to Łapa: 'Ha! A right dandy bastard, picking out his fleas like a wench off to a wedding!'

And being a hard worker, he set about his chores: rolled the cart out of the barn and greased it; watered the horses and topped up their hay until they began to whinny and stamp their hooves; and then fetched some stray ears of wheat, well garnished with oats, from the hayloft and tipped them into the mare's trough, in her separate stall.

'Get it down, old girl; you've a foal on the way, you need your strength, eat up!' He stroked her muzzle and the mare leaned her head on his arm, tugging his matted hair affectionately with her lips.

'We'll get the potatoes in by midday and be off to the woods come evening, for leaf litter – never fear, litter's light, I shan't wear you out ... As for you, lazybones, you'll get the whip. Look at him, sniffing the oats, the sluggard,' he said to the gelding standing close by and pushing his head between the slats of the stall towards the mare's manger. He whacked the horse's rump with his fist so that it jumped aside and neighed.

'Aye, you Jew's hireling! You'd gobble up pure oats, but you won't shift without the whip, you rascal, hey?'

He skirted round the gelding and peered in at the filly who was already standing by the wall and stretching out her chestnut head with its white flash towards him, whinnying softly.

'Hush, little one, hush! Eat up. You're off to town with the master!'

He took a wad of hay and rubbed down her soiled flank. 'Mare enough now for a stallion, but mucky! Wallowing like a sow.' Chattering away, Kuba went to the sties to let out the squealing pigs, while Łapa followed him everywhere, peering up at him constantly.

'Hungry too, eh? Here's a bit o' bread then, here!' He pulled out a piece from his bosom and tossed it; the dog caught it and ran to his kennel as the pigs rushed to snatch it from him.

'Ha, these pigs are like some folk, all for grabbing what's another's and getting it down their necks ...'

He peered into the barn and gazed at the dead cow hanging from the rafters.

'Just a poor stupid creature, but it too met its end. I'm thinking they'll be roasting meat tomorrow. That's all that's left of you, poor beggar, a good Sunday dinner ...'

He sighed at the thought of the meal and staggered off to wake Witek ...

'The sun'll be up any minute ... it's time to get the cows out.'

Witek muttered something, resisting at first and pressing against the sheepskin, but finally he got up and shuffled sleepily into the yard.

The farmer had overslept today, for the sun was up already, turning the frost pink, setting water and windowpanes ablaze, and still no one stirred at the cottage ...

Witek sat on the threshold of the byre, scratching vehemently and yawning. Seeing the sparrows beginning to flutter down from the roof to the well and splashing in the trough, he fetched a ladder to look into the swallows' nest under the eaves as it was strangely quiet up there.

'Have they frozen or what?' And he began to pull out the poor distressed birds delicately and put them in his bosom. 'Hey, Kuba, look they've died – see.'

He ran to the farmhand and showed him the stiff, lifeless swallows. But Kuba just took them in his hand, held them against his ear, blew into their eyes and said: 'They're dead owing to the hard frost. The daft 'uns didn't fly off to warmer lands, aye, well ...' And off he went to his chores.

Witek sat down by the cottage, at the gable end that the sunlight had just reached and was pouring over the whitewashed walls on which the flies were beginning to crawl. From his shirt he began to pull out the birds, which were now twitching, warmed by his body. He puffed at them, prised open their little beaks and fed them from his own lips, until they began to revive, opening their eyes and trying to struggle free of his grasp; then with his right hand he'd grope the wall, pounce on a fly and feed it to a bird before letting it go.

'Off to your mother, off you go,' he whispered, watching as the swallows alighted on the ridge of the byre roof,¹ preening their feathers with their beaks and seemingly twittering their thanks.

All the while Łapa sat on his rump beside Witek, giving droll little whimpers. He leapt at every little bird that flew off, chasing it for a few steps before returning to his post.

'Aye, try catching the wind in the field,' muttered Witek. He was so immersed in warming the swallows that he didn't see Boryna come round the corner and stand before him.

'Playing with birds, are you, you lout?'

Witek leapt up to race away but the farmer had already grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and with his other hand was quickly unfastening his wide, hard leather belt.

'Don't beat me, don't!' Witek managed to yell.

'A cowherd, eh? This is how you do your job, eh? My best cow done for, eh? You foundling, you oaf, you!' And Boryna beat him frenziedly wherever he could, until the leather whistled and the boy squirmed like an eel, yelling:

'Don't hit me! God! He's killing me! Master! Jesus, help!'

Even Hanka looked out of the house to see what was going on, while Kuba just spat and hid in the stable.

Boryna went on thrashing with a vengeance, scoring his own loss on to the boy's skin so fiercely that Witek's face was livid and the blood flowing from his nose. He shrieked at the top of his lungs and by some miracle broke away, grabbed the back of his breeches with both hands and shot behind the picket fence.

'Jesus, he's killed me, he's killed me!' he howled and ran so fast that the rest of the swallows flew out from his shirt and scattered along the road.

Boryna, still shaking his fist, put on his belt and returned to the cottage, looking in on Antek's side of the house.

'The sun's two fellows high² and you're still lazing about!' he shouted at his son.

'I was dead on my feet yesterday. I've got to rest up.'

'I'm off to court. Get the potatoes in, and when they've finished digging, get them to rake in the leaf litter. And you could knock in the stakes for the winter walls.'³

'Do it yourself – it's not draughty round this end.'

'You don't say ... I'll do my side then, and you can freeze, you layabout.' Boryna slammed the door and returned to his own side.

Józka had lit the stove already and was off to milk the cow.

'Get me something to eat quick. I have to be off.'

'Well, I can't split myself and do two jobs at once,' retorted Józka and off she went.

'There's not a second's peace to be had! I must be always at odds with all of 'em!' he mused as he began to dress, but he was vexed and angry. It was constant war with his son; he couldn't say a word without Antek showing his claws or coming out with something that hit you in the gut. No one to lean on, nothing but graft and more graft!

And his annoyance grew so that he cursed under his breath and tossed his clothes and boots about the room.

'They should obey me but they don't! Why not?' he thought. 'Seems I'll get nowhere without the stick, good and hard! They've had it coming to 'em since the moment she died, God rest her, when they began squabbling over the land, but still I hesitated, so as not to cause scandal in the village. I'm not just any farmer, I've thirty morgen, and not just anyone by birth – a Boryna, goes without saying. But kindness'll get me nowhere, oh no!'

And his son-in-law the blacksmith came to mind, who was forever inciting the others while he himself kept insisting on six morgen to be signed over and a morgen of forest and, as for the rest, he'd wait ...

'Not till I'm dead and gone! Wait, you beggar, wait away,' he thought crossly. 'You'll not get a sniff of a single field while I live and breathe! Hark at him, the know-it-all!'

The potatoes were boiling on the stove by the time Józka returned from milking and she soon had breakfast ready.

'Józka! You sell the meat yourself. It's Sunday tomorrow, people have heard already, so they'll soon be thronging; nothing on credit, mind. Leave us the haunch; we'll send for Ambrozy to salt and prepare it.'

'Blacksmith knows how to as well ...'

'Oh aye, and he'd share it out like a wolf with a sheep.'

'Magda will be glum that it's our cow and she's not got a look in.'

'Well, cut a piece for your sister and take it over, then, but no calling the smith.'

'That's good of you, *Tanula*.'

'All right, my girl! Mind the house, and I'll bring you back a roll or something.'

He ate a good breakfast, then put on his belt, spat on his palm to smooth his sparse, dishevelled hair, picked up his whip and paused to look about the room.

'Have I not forgotten something?' He wanted to look in the storeroom, but refrained since Józka was watching, and merely crossed himself and left.

But once on the cart, gathering the canvas reins in his fist, he said to Józka on the porch:

'When the potatoes are in, they're to go rake the leaf litter – the docket's behind the picture.⁴ And get them to chop down a hornbeam or a spruce – it'll come in useful.'⁵

The cart moved off and was in the farmyard already when Witek flashed past under the apple trees.

'I forgot ... whoa ... Witek! Whoa! Witek, take the cows out to the meadow and mind them well, or I'll give you a hiding to remember, you varmint!'

'Eh, you can kiss my ...' the boy shouted back impudently, vanishing behind the barn.

'Any lip from you and I'll show you what's what when I get down ...'

Boryna turned left from the farm, towards the church, flicking the filly with the whip so that she trotted along the rough stony road.

The sun was just over the cottages and warmer now, for steam was rising and water dripping from the hoary thatch, and only in the shadows, under orchard fences and in ditches did grizzled ice still linger. The last wisps of mist drifted over the pond and underneath this milky film the water began to shimmer and reflect the sun.

In the village, the usual bustle began. It was a bright, chilly morning and folk were moving briskly and more noisily in the bracing frosty air: they headed to the fields together, some to dig, with mattocks and baskets on their arms, finishing their breakfast on the way; others dragged ploughs on to the stubble; some brought harrows in carts and sacks full of seed for sowing; and others turned towards the forest, rakes on their shoulders, to gather leaf litter. Noise and rumbling thus grew on both sides of the pond, for the roads were crammed with cattle being taken to pasture, loud with the barking of dogs and shouts erupting now and then from beneath the low heavy clouds of dust that rose from the dew-covered roads. Boryna steered carefully through the herds and flocks, sometimes brushing against the woolly fleece of some silly sheep or calf that hadn't moved out of the filly's way, until he had passed them all and was nearing the church, which stood in the shade of a mighty bulwark of yellowing lindens and maples, before joining a wide highway lined on both sides with great poplars.

Mass was in progress inside the church, and as the bell in the spire was ringing for the offertory, to the muffled booming of the organ, he took off his hat and crossed himself piously.

The road was empty and strewn so thickly with leaves that the bumps and deep wheel-ruts were covered in a carpet of rusty gold, crossed by wide bands of shadow thrown by the trunks of the poplars as the sunlight shone askant behind them.

'Gee up, missy, gee up!' Boryna swished his whip and the filly went more briskly for a couple of furlongs, but then slowed and plodded as the road began to rise, though only gradually, towards the forest, black in the distance.

Growing drowsy in the silence, Boryna peered through the columns of poplars at the fields, basking in the rosy morning light. He tried to think about the case with Ewka, or about the skewbald – but he could barely fight off the sleepiness ...

Little birds twittered in the branches. Now and then the wind combed its fingers gently through the tips of the trees so that a leaf would break free and fall, spinning like a golden butterfly, on to the road or the dusty thistles whose fiery eyes stared impudently at the sun, while the poplars talked among themselves, rustling their branches gently, and then fell silent, like old biddies at the Elevation, who raise their eyes, spread their hands and sigh prayerfully, to crumble quickly into dust before the Majesty hidden in the golden monstrance and suspended above this dear, this sacred earth ...⁶

On reaching the forest, he finally roused himself thoroughly and stopped the horse.

'Coming up nicely,' he murmured, surveying the grey fields against the light, with their short, rust-coloured brush of sprouting rye.

'Good bit o' land, and bordering mine, as though it were meant! I saw yesterday they'd planted rye.' Boryna swept a covetous eye over the harrowed strips, sighed and drove into the forest. He kept prodding the horse on, as the road was now level and firm, though densely overgrown with roots, over which the cart jolted and rattled. Enveloped in the harsh cold breath of the woods, he wasn't dozing now.

A huge and ancient forest, it stood dense and thick in the majesty of age and might, tree beside tree, almost all pines, but often a forked oak, grey with years, and sometimes birches in white smocks, their yellow plaits now hanging loose, as it was autumn already. The undergrowth of hazel, dwarf beech or quivering aspens nestled against the mighty red trunks, their crowns so closely bound and branches so entangled that the sun broke through only here and there, its rays creeping like golden spiders over the green moss and ruddy ferns.

'There's always my four morgen here!' he thought, devouring the wood with his eyes, and picking out the best trees by eye. 'The Lord Jesus will surely not let us be wronged – we ourselves shan't stand for it. The manor thinks it too much, while we say too little.'⁷

Let's see ... my four, and Jagusia's one morgen, that's four and one ... Gee up! Daft beast, scared of a magpie! He flicked her with the whip, for the magpies on the dry tree where a crucifix was hanging⁸ were squabbling so vehemently that the filly had pricked up her ears and kept stopping.

'Magpies' wedding – rains a-spreading.' He gave the filly a few strokes of the whip and she broke into a trot.

It was well after eight o'clock and folk in the fields were sitting down to their second breakfast⁹ when Boryna arrived in Tymów's empty little streets, lined with dilapidated houses squatting like old fishwives beside gutters full of rubbish, chickens, pigs and ragged Jewish children.

Almost instantly on his arrival, a crowd of Jewish men and women fell upon him,¹⁰ looking into the cart and groping in the straw and under the seat, to see if he'd brought anything to sell.

'Get lost, you scabs!' he growled, driving into the marketplace under the shadow of some ancient peeling chestnuts languishing in the middle of the square where a dozen wagons were standing already, their horses unhitched.

He parked his own wagon too and turned the filly to face the cart-bed, where he'd tipped some feed, then stowed his whip under the seat, brushed the straw from his clothes and made straight for Mordko's, where three great discs shone outside,¹¹ to get a shave. He soon emerged, clean-shaven, with a single nick on the chin, plastered with a bit of paper through which the blood seeped.

The court was not yet open.

But in front of the court house, which was right on the square, opposite a huge former monastery church,¹² a sizeable crowd was waiting. They sat on the worn steps, or gathered under the windows, peering in from time to time; the women squatted by the whitewashed walls, letting the red aprons with which they had covered their heads slip on to their shoulders and chattering.

Boryna was instantly irritated at the sight of Ewka, her child in her arms, standing in the crowd among her witnesses, and since he was quick to anger, he spat and went into the other hallway, which ran the length of the judge's dwelling.

On the left was the court house and on the right lived the secretary,¹³ where Jacek had just placed the samovar¹⁴ on the threshold and was fanning it so fiercely with the shaft of his boot that it fumed like a factory chimney, while a sharp cross voice shouted constantly from the depths of the smoky hallway:

'Jacek! Fetch the young ladies' slippers!'

'Coming, coming!'

The samovar roared and belched flames like a volcano.

'Jacek! Hot water for the master to wash.'

'Aye, aye, it's on its way it is!' Sweaty, bewildered, Jacek raced about until the hallway thundered, returned, blew on the samovar and ran off again, as the lady of the house shrieked:

'Jacek, you oaf! Where are my stockings?!'

'Ha! Blasted samovar!'

On it went for a good few prayers, or even a whole chaplet, until at last the court-house doors opened and folk began to fill the large whitewashed chamber.

Jacek, as usher now, barefoot, in deep-blue breeches and a jerkin of the same colour with brass buttons, wiped his red perspiring face again and again on his sleeve as he bustled about behind the black grating dividing the chamber in two, and tossed his head like a horse tormented by a gadfly as his flaxen hair fell over his eyes like a mane. Peering cautiously into the neighbouring room, he then perched for a moment by a green-tiled stove.

Meanwhile, people were packed in tightly, like sardines, and pressed against the grating until it creaked. The murmur of voices, low at first, slowly grew, rippled and rolled about the chamber, booming at times and erupting occasionally into squabbles, so that a harsh word or two was ever more frequently heard.

Jews were jabbering under the windows, while inside women were recounting their grievances out loud and lamenting more loudly still, but impossible to tell who was speaking or whereabouts in the throng, with head beside head like a field of red poppies or spikes of rye that, when driven by the wind, sway and chatter and murmur, and then stand straight, ear to ear. Then Ewka, spying Boryna leaning on the grating, began needling him and hurling insults, so that, incensed, he retorted sharply:

'Quiet, you slut, or I'll rattle your ribs so that your own sister won't know you.'

At which Ewka, enraged, was out with the claws and yelling at him through the crush of people, until her headscarf slid off and the child began to wail, and who knows how it might have ended when Jacek suddenly jumped up, opened the door and shouted:

'Quiet, scum, court's coming!'

And indeed it was: first came the judges – a tall stout squire from Raciborowice and two magistrates – followed by the secretary, who sat down at a side table by the window and set out his papers, one eye on the judges as they stopped at a great table covered in red cloth and donned gold chains around their thick necks ...¹⁵

All was now quiet, so that the chattering in the street under the window could be clearly heard.

The squire spread out his papers, grunted, glanced at the secretary and in a deep sonorous voice declared the court to be in session.

Next, the secretary read out the business of the day and whispered something to the first magistrate, who passed it on to the presiding judge, who nodded his head in affirmation. The court began.

The first case involved a gendarme's¹⁶ complaint against some townsman for the disorder in his courtyard.

Sentenced *in absentia*.

Then came a boy who'd been flogged for letting cows graze in someone's clover.

A compromise – five roubles¹⁷ for the mother, and a new jacket and trousers for the boy.

A ploughing encroachment.

Dismissed for lack of evidence.

A case of timber theft from the judge's woods; a complaint brought by the bailiff – the accused being peasants from Rokiciny.

A fine, or a fortnight's imprisonment.

The judgement was rejected; the peasants gave notice of appeal.

So loudly did they begin to protest the injustice, since it was common woodland by right of easement, that the judge beckoned to Jacek, who thundered:

'Oi, quiet! A courtroom it is, not an inn!'

And so case followed case, like furrow after furrow, steadily and peaceably enough, with only occasional complaints, snivels or even cursing, which Jacek smartly suppressed. Some folk left the chamber, but were quickly replaced by so many newcomers they were stooked like sheaves, so that no one could move and it grew so hot it was impossible to breathe until the judge ordered a window to be opened.

It was the turn of Bartek Koziol from Lipce¹⁸ concerning the theft of a pig from Marcjanna Antonówna Pacześ.¹⁹ The witnesses: the said Marcjanna, her son Szymek, Barbara Piesek and others.

'Are the witnesses present?' asked a magistrate.

'We are,' they chorused.

Boryna, who had been standing alone patiently by the grating, moved somewhat closer to Mistress Pacześ to greet her, since this was Dominik's widow, Jagna's mother.

'Let the defendant, Bartek Koziol, approach the grating.'

A short peasant pushed his way forward so roughly that they all began to curse him for treading on their feet and dragging against their clothes.

'Shut it, scum, the illustrious court is speaking!' yelled Jacek, letting him through.

'Are you Bartłomiej Koziol?'

The peasant scratched his thick cropped hair worriedly: a silly grin twisted his gaunt clean-shaven face, his small reddish eyes darting sly as squirrels over the judges.

'Are you Bartłomiej Koziol?' the presiding judge repeated, as the peasant stood silent.

'Aye, he's Bartłomiej Koziol all right, if it please the illustrious court!' squealed a huge woman, forcing her way to the grating.

'What's your business?'

'Why, if it please the court, I'm the wife of this poor devil, Bartek Koziol.' And she bowed, scraping her hand on the floor, so that her frilled bonnet bumped against the judges' table.

'Are you testifying?'

'Like a witness? Me? Nay, I'm only entreating ...'

'Usher, remove her beyond the grating.'

'Out with you, woman, this ain't no place for you.' Jacek seized her by the shoulders and pushed her back.

'I entreat the illustrious court, my husband is hard of hearing,' she shouted.

'Out you go, while I'm feeling kindly,' said Jacek, and she fair yelled as he dashed her against the grating, for she wasn't going to take a single step willingly.

'Go out – we'll talk loud. He may be a goat by name,²⁰ but he'll hear well enough!'

The hearing began at last.

'What is your name?'

'Eh? ... How dubbed? Why, they called me in, so they know, don't they ...'

'You fool. What is your name?' the judge quizzed him regardless.

'Bartek Koziol, your honour,' his wife threw in.

'Age?'

'Eh? ... Age? ... How do I know? Mother, how many years is it?'

'Fifty-two, to my mind, in the spring.'

'You're a farmer?'

'Eh, three morgen of sand and a cow's tail ... a fine farmer.'

'Any convictions?'

'Eh? ... Convictions?'

'Were you ever in the slammer?'

'The clink, you mean? Convictions? Mother, was I ever in the clink, eh?'

'You were, Bartek, you were. It were that scum from the manor over that dead lamb ...'

'Aye, aye, I found a dead lamb on the pasture ... so I takes it, dogs would have torn it apart. They complains, swears I stole it, the court tries me ... and they locked me up and there I sat. It were unjust. Unjust,' he said quietly, glancing stealthily towards his wife.

'You're accused of stealing a sow from Marcjanna Pacześ! You took it from the field, drove it home, slaughtered and ate it! What have you to say in your defence?'

'Eh? Ate it! May I never set eyes on the Lord at my death's door if I ate it ... Well, I never – ate it! Heavens above, ate it! Me?' he cried piteously.

'What have you to say in your defence?'

'Defence? What were it I was to say, Mother? Oh aye: innocent I am, I didn't eat no pig, and Marcjanna Dominikowa, let me say, is nowt but a yapping dog that needs grabbing by its nasty snout and thrashing ... and ...'

'Heavens above!' exclaimed Dominikowa.

'Well, you can sort that out later, but tell us now how the Pacześes' sow came to be at your place?'

'The Pacześes' sow – at my place? Mother, what's the honourable squire saying?'

'Why, Bartek, it's about that piglet what followed you home ...'

'Oh aye, aye – it were but a piglet, not some hog. Begging your honour's pardon, let them listen to what I'm saying and I'll say it again: a piglet it were, not a hog; a whitey piglet, with a black patch near its tail or a bit lower down.'

'Very well, but how did it come to be at your place?'

'At my place? I'll soon explain exact so as the illustrious court and all the folk gathered here will see that I'm not guilty, and Dominikowa's a fibbing Gypsy and a pox-ridden tattletale!'

'Me, a liar! I'll be ... by our Holy Lady, may a thunderbolt not strike you before you get to confession!' Dominikowa said quietly, with a deep sigh towards the picture of the Mother of God hanging in a corner of the chamber, and then, since she couldn't restrain herself any longer, she clenched her bony fist and stretched it towards him, hissing: 'You thieving swine! You thug, you!'

And she splayed her fingers as though wanting to grab him.

But Bartek's wife leapt at her with a shriek.

'What! Hit him would you, you bitch, you witch, you tyrant of a mother, you!'

'Silence!' shouted the judge.

'Shut yer traps when judge is speaking or I'm chucking yer out!' Jacek seconded him, hitching up his coarse breeches, since his belt had come off.

Silence fell at once, and the two women, who had all but flown at each other, now stood quietly, though glaring and breathing heavily in their fury.

'Speak up, Bartłomiej; tell us the whole truth.'

'Truth? ... I'm telling the truth, clear as glass, honest as confession, farmer to farmer, like kin to kin, for I'm a farmer, I am, from a long line. I'm no hired hand, nor some professionalist²¹ or town crook. It were like this ...'

'Think on carefully, so you don't forget anything,' his wife advised him.

'I'll not forget, Magda, no. It were like this. I'm walking along ... I remember it were nearly spring ... past Wolf's Hollow, by Boryna's clover. I'm going along and saying my prayers, since they'd rung the Angelus, and evening were coming ... I'm going along ... and then what's this I hear? A voice or what? Lordy, I think: is that grunting or what? I look around – nothing, nowt to be seen, dead quiet. Is it the devil, tempting me? I go a bit further and I've goosebumps with dread, so I say a Hail Mary. More grunts! "Well, I'll be!" I think to myself. "Can be nowt but a pig or a piglet, even." I go off the path a bit, into the clover, and look about ... Aye something's creeping after me – I stop, it stops, and it's white and long and low ... and its eyes are shining like those of a lynx or some wicked thing. I crossed myself, since my flesh were crawling, and I didn't hang about – I mean, who knows what's knocking about at night? And everyone in Lipce knows what haunts Wolf's Hollow.'

'Aye, it's true. Sikora were passing that way at night a year since and it grabbed him by the gullet and threw him to the ground and gave him such a whopping the fellow were ill two weeks,' his wife recounted.

'Hush, Magduś, hush! I'm walking, walking ... walking ... and it's right behind me and grunting! And since just then the moon's climbing up in the sky, I look and see it's only a piglet and nowt evil. I were mad as ... what's the daft 'un thinking, frightening folk, so I throw a stick at it and I'm off home. Down the strip between Michal's beets and Boryna's wheat, and then between Tomek's spring wheat and the oats of that Jacek what the army took last year whose wife gave birth yesterday. Piglet's right after me like a dog, or at my side, or it's in Dominikowa's potatoes, squeaking here, squeaking there, grunting, squealing, but it don't stop, keeps on after me ...

'I turn by yon path that cuts across – it's right behind. I'm getting hot and bothered now, because is it really a pig or not? I turn on to the road by yon cross – piglet's behind. I seen it's a white 'un, but by its tail, down a bit, black patches! I'm over the ditch – piglet's right behind; then past those mounds near the cross – piglet's behind; I make for the stone heaps, and if it don't hurl itself at my legs – I come crashing down, flat on my face. Is it possessed, or what? I'm barely on my feet again when it jumps off and away with a flick o' the tail! "Off with you, then, pox-ridden beast," I think. But it's not run off, it were just running ahead – right to mine – right into my house, your honour, right past the fence, right into the hallway, and since the door to the room were open, right into the front room ... so help me God. Amen!'

'And then you slaughtered and ate it?' said the judge, much amused.

'You what? Slaughtered and ate it? What were 'un supposed to do? A day's gone by, piglet's not leaving; a week goes by – there it is. You chase it out, it's right back squealing! My woman shoves it some scraps – can't starve it, can you, God's creature ... Your honour's wise and I'll see what's fair, what's a poor man to do with it? No one's coming for it, times are terrible hard – and it's stuffing more than enough for two down its face. Another month and it'd have eaten us, house and all. What's to do? It had us in a corner – so we ate it, and not all of it either. Village soon got wind of it, and Dominikowa comes complaining it's hers. She comes with the Soltys²² and takes the lot.'

'The lot, you say? And the whole rump, where's that?' hissed Dominikowa balefully.

'Where? You ask Kruczka and them other dogs. We took it out to the barn by night. And the dogs, since they're a smart pair and there's holes in the door, pulled it out and had themselves a party at the expense o' my sweat and tears, and went about stuffed as squires.'

'Oh, the pig followed him, to be sure. A fool might believe it, but not this court. Thieving scum, what about the miller's ram, and the priest's goose – who took them, eh?'

'You saw, did you? Saw it?' shrieked Koziol's wife, jumping up, fingernails at the ready.

'And the organist's potatoes, who took those? Something's forever missing in the village – a goose gone, a hen or a tool,' Dominikowa went on relentlessly.

'You scum! No one says a word about what you got up to as a lass, and what your Jagna's up to now with the farmhands, but there's you, yapping like a dog.'

'Don't you dare bring Jagna into it! Hands off, or I'll give you such a beating that ... Hands off!' she bellowed, cut to the quick.

'Quiet, loudmouths, or I'll throw yer out!' Jacek shushed them, hoisting up his breeches.

The witnesses were then questioned.

First came Dominikowa, the injured party, who testified in a subdued and pious voice, avowing time after time by the Virgin of Częstochowa that the pig was hers, crossing herself and beating her breast, that it was true that Koziol had stolen it from the pasture, but she did not demand that their worship's punish him – no no, let the good Jesus instead not spare him purgatory; instead, she insisted in a loud voice, let the court punish him for vilifying her and her Jagna in front of all the people.

Then Dominikowa's son Szymek testified. His cap dangling from his hands, clasped as in prayer, he did not take his eyes off the judge and in a dazed and plaintive voice asserted that it was indeed his mother's pig, that it was white all over with a single black patch by the tail and a torn ear, from when Boryna's Łapa had snatched at it back in the spring and it had squealed so loud he'd heard it as far off as the barn.

Then Barbara Piesek was called, and others besides.

They each swore and gave evidence by turn, and still Szymek stood, cap in hand, gazing piously at the judge, while Koziol's wife clamoured behind the grate with protestations of denial and shouts of abuse, and Dominikowa sighed towards the holy picture while squinting sideways at Koziol who, eyes darting, strained to hear what was being said and cast about for his dear Magda.

People were listening attentively, and now and then a murmur, a snide comment or peal of hollow laughter rang out to the rafters so that Jacek had to silence them with a threat. The case dragged on, right until the recess, during which the court retired to the adjoining chamber to confer, and people poured into the hallway and just outside the building to recover somewhat: some to have a bite, some to conspire with their witnesses, some to air their grievances and others still to complain and rail against injustice, as is the custom with lawsuits.

After the recess and sentencing, Boryna's case reached the table.

Ewka stood before the court and, rocking her child, wrapped in her apron, began tearfully listing her woes and injuries, how she had served at Boryna's and worked till she was fit to drop and never a good word did she hear, nor did she have enough food nor even a corner to sleep, so that she had to eat at the neighbours', and then he did not pay her for her labours and instead cast her out, with his own child, into the wide world ... She burst into floods of tears and threw herself to her knees in front of the judges, crying:

'Wronged I've been! Wronged! And it's his child, illustrious court!'

'Lies like a dog,' muttered Boryna in horror.

'I'm the liar?! When everyone – the whole of Lipce knows that ...'

'That you're a slut and a gadabout.'

'Your honour, it used to be "little Ewka", "Ewie mine" and words even sweeter, and I'd be brought beads or a roll and butter many a time with an "'Ere you go, little Ewie, here, because you're my dearest one", and now, Jesus, my Jesus!' She began to bawl.

'You lying beggar. Maybe I tucked you in under a quilt too and said: "Nightie night, Evie!"'

The chamber rocked with laughter.

'And did you not? Are you not lying, then, like yon dog by the door? You promised nothing, then?'

'Good God! You'd think lightning would strike such a monster!' Boryna exclaimed, astonished.

'Your honour, everyone knew how it was, all Lipce can testify that I'm telling the truth. When I were serving at theirs, he'd never give me no peace. Poor abandoned waif, I am! Wretched fate of mine! Like I could defend myself against a big man like that? I yelled, so he thrashed me and had his way ... Where am I to go with this little one, where? Witnesses'll tell and testify!' she cried, amid her tears and wailing.

But in fact the witnesses could avouch nothing beyond gossip and surmises, so again she took up protesting and persuading, until at last, as a final proof, she unwrapped the child and placed it before the judges; the baby kicked its bare legs and shrieked to high heaven.

'Your honours can see for 'emselves whose it is. Here – same potato nose, same shifty grey eyes. Peas in a pod, couldn't be but Boryna's!' she cried.

But now even the court could not refrain from laughter, while folk hooted with merriment, peering first at the child and then at Boryna, their comments flying:

'A right little miss, like a skinned dog!'

'Boryna's a widower. He could marry her and the boy'd be handy for the cows ...'

'She's moulting like a cow in springtime.'

'What a looker! Sling round some pea stalks and stand in her in the millet – all o' the crows'll scarper.'

'The dogs already leg it when Ewie comes through the village!'

'She's got a mug like it's been washed in slops.'

'Cause she's thrifty, washes once a year to save on soap.'

'She's got no time, what with lighting Jews' stoves²³ so it's no surprise!'

The taunts grew meaner and crueller and she fell silent and gazed around at the people with the vacant eyes of a hunted dog, turning something over in her mind.

'Be quiet! It's a sin to mock poor wretches!' cried Dominikowa so loudly that they were silent, and many a one scratched his head in shame.

The case ended in nothing.

Boryna felt immeasurable relief, for though he was innocent, still he feared people's backbiting and the threat of being fined – for you never knew which way the law might go, or whom it would seize by the scruff, the guilty or the innocent. Oh, it would not be the first time, nor the second – nor even the tenth.

He left the court immediately and, waiting for Dominikowa, began to meditate and to ponder the whole matter. He could not understand why or to what end she'd accused him.

'Nay, it's not her doing. It's someone else by way of her, but who?'

He went with Dominikowa and Szymek to the inn for a drink and a bite to eat, since it was long past noon, and though Dominikowa hinted gently that this whole Ewka business must be the work of his son-in-law, the blacksmith, he could not credit it.

'What would he get out of it?'

'The satisfaction of provoking and mortifying, making you a laughing stock. That's how people are; they'd strip someone clean for their own amusement.'

'I cannot fathom that Ewka's doggedness! I did her no harm. What's more, I gave the priest a sack of oats for christening that bastard of hers.'

'She's working at the miller's, and he's a crony of the blacksmith's. Now do you see?'

'I see, but I'm none the wiser! Have another drink!'

'God bless – you first, Maciej!'

They had another drink and another, a second pound²⁴ of sausage and half a loaf, the old man bought rolls for Józka and they made ready to return.

'Come ride with me, Dominikowa. It's dull alone; we'll have a talk.'

'All right, then – I'll just nip into church to say a prayer.'

Off she went, but was back in the space of a couple of prayers and they set off.

Szymek followed slowly, for his cart had but a single old nag and the sand on the road was atrocious. Somewhat confused besides, being unused to drink and bewildered by the court, he swayed sleepily against the wicker chassis, and jerking awake again and again, he'd snatch his cap from his head, crossing himself piously, staring vacantly at the nag's tail, as if into the squire's face at court, and mumbling:

'Mother's pig, white all over, just a black patch near its tail.'

The sun was rolling to the west when they rode into the forest.

Boryna and Dominikowa talked very little, though they were sitting side by side on the front seat. One or other would pipe up from time to time, since it was unseemly to sit there like two curmudgeons, but just enough to stave off drowsiness or a dry mouth ...

Boryna spurred on the filly as she was slowing down, and her flanks were lathered with tiredness and heat. Sometimes he whistled or simply sat silent, ruminating and pondering something, calculating and casting surreptitious glances at the old woman beside him, at her dry face as bleached as wax and set with long furrows, as she moved her toothless mouth as though praying quietly. Sometimes she pulled her red headscarf over her brow, for the sun was shining straight at them, and sat motionless with only her grey eyes burning.

'Finished with the digging?' he ventured finally.

'Oh, aye. Not a bad harvest.'

'It'll be easier to fatten a beast.'

'Aye, I've set aside a porker – might come in handy for carnival ...'²⁵

'Indeed, indeed ... they say Rafał's Walek has sent the vodka round to yours?'

'He's not the only one, oh no ... but they're throwing money away, they are. My Jagna is not for the likes of them. Oh no.' She raised her head and fixed her eyes on him like a hawk, but Boryna was getting on in years and no hothead, and his face was cool, calm and inscrutable. For a good while they spoke not a word, as though wrestling with each other in their muteness.

It was unfitting for Boryna to begin, for how could he, a man of his years and first farmer in all of Lipce, how could he declare that Jagna had caught his eye? He had his dignity after all, and knew his own mind – but being hot-tempered by nature, he was seized with exasperation that he must so guard himself, beat about the bush and solicit.

Dominikowa scrutinized him and marked what was distressing and disturbing him, but not a word did she say to help and only glanced about her from time to time or into the distant blue, until she observed casually:

'It's hot as harvest-time.'

'Indeed.'

And so it felt, for the road was surrounded by such mighty walls of forest that neither wind nor breeze could break through from the fields and the sun hung straight overhead and beat down, baking the trees, which drooped, languid and still, over the road, shedding amber needles now and then, which eddied down. The fungal smell of marsh and oak leaves filled their nostrils.

'You know, it's odd to me, and others too, that such a farmer, with more than common sense, and land aplenty, and held in high regard – such as yourself, for example – has no ambition to hold office ...'

'You've hit on it, I've not the ambition. What's in it for me? I was Soltys three years since – it cost me plenty of cash. Wearing out myself and my horses besides! And the bickering and rushing about, worse than a dog out hunting ... And the farm went to rack and ruin so that my wife didn't have a good word for me.'

'She had a point too. To be an official ought always to bring profit as well as honour.'

'Amen to that: bow to the guardsman, bend the knee to the clerk and any old upstart from the authorities – oh yes – a proper honour! If taxes aren't paid, or the bridge gets damaged, a dog goes mad, who cops it – who's guilty? Why, the Soltys, it's the Soltys who pays the penalty. Ha, there's your profit. Have I not taken chickens and eggs enough to the notary,²⁶ and a goose or two?'

'It's true, what you say, but being Voyt has done Piotr no harm, oh no; he's added to his land, built a barn, and he's got those great beasts of horses!'

'Indeed, but there's no knowing what'll be left of it when his term ends.'

'You think so ...'

'I've eyes in my head and I mark a little ...'

'Smug he is, and at loggerheads with the priest.'

'If it's going well, then it's all down to his wife; he can do his voyting but she holds the reins.'

They were silent again for the space of a good prayer.

'And will you not be sending round the vodka to anyone?' she asked cautiously.

'Eh, I'm not drawn to women now, too old ...'

'Away with your nonsense! He is old who cannot move, cannot lift a spoon to his mouth and lingers by the stove ... I've seen how you heave a sack of rye.'

'Indeed, I'm hale enough, but who would have me?'

'You can't know if you don't try. See!'

'I'm old, my children are grown ... and I won't take the first lass to hand.'

'You need only make them a settlement²⁷ and the very best won't reject you ...'

'For a settlement! Like swine! For a morgen the purest girl will pick up a beggar from outside the church ...'

'Because men take no note of dowries, eh?'

He didn't answer, only flicked the filly with his whip till she lurched into a canter.

A long silence followed.

It was not until they'd left the forest for the fields, between the roadside poplars, that Boryna, who all this time had been seething and simmering inside, finally exploded:

'The devil take such an order of things in this world! Pay up for everything, yes, even for a kind word! Things are bad and could hardly be worse; even children rising against their fathers.

There's no respect, and everyone at each other's throats like dogs.'

'Because they're stupid and take no heed that we'll all come to lie in the same holy ground.'

'One or t'other has barely learned to walk and already they're mouthing at their father for their piece of land. They mock their elders! Scum, the village is too cramped for 'em, the old ways don't suit 'em, even our dress shames some of 'em!'

'It's all because they have no fear of God.'

'Whether it's that or not, things are bad.'

'And not getting better, no.'

'How can it? Who'll make 'em?'

'Divine punishment! For the hour of the Lord's judgement will come, that it will.'

'But the folk who'll go to ruin before then, no one can undo that.'

'Such times; would be better if the pestilence came.'

'The times! Indeed, but people are guilty too. The blacksmith, what about him! And the Voyt? At odds with the priest, agitates and bamboozles the people, and the stupid are taken in. That blacksmith's poison, though he's my son-in-law ...'

And so they denounced this world together, observing the village, which was clearly visible now through the poplars. By the graveyard, the red skirts of a row of women could be seen from a distance, bent over and wreathed in the delicate mist of smoking fires, and before long the dull monotonous thud of scutchers²⁸ began to reach them on the breeze rising from the low-lying meadows.

'It's a good time for scutching. I'll get down there, since my Jagna's with them.'

'It's on my way, I'll take you ...'

'Why Maciej, that's surprising good of you!' She smiled slyly.

They turned off the poplar road along a track by the fields that ran to the cemetery gates. He drove her to the graveyard, where, by a grey stone wall, in the shade of birches and maples and lop-sided crosses leaning from the graves towards the fields, a dozen or so women were doggedly scraping the dry flax with scutchers, until a fog of dust hovered above them and the long fibres caught on the yellow birch leaves and hung from the dark arms of the crosses. Below, on rods stretched over hollows in which fires were burning, the still-damp flax was drying.

The scutchers tapped away smartly until the whole row of women was bent over, making short quick little jerks as they scraped. Now and then one of them would straighten up, shake off the last shives²⁹ from a handful of flax, wind it into a straw man or capsheaf and toss it on to the sheet spread before her.

Now that the sun had moved over the wood, it shone straight into their faces, but what of it – the work, laughter and merry chatter did not stop, not even for the blink of an eye.

'God bless the work!' Boryna called to Jagna, who was scutching at the very edge; she was in but a smock and a red skirt, a kerchief on her head to keep off the dust.

'God bless!' she called back merrily, raising her great blue eyes towards him, and a smile flitted across her bonny tanned face.

'It's dry, my girl, eh?' the old woman asked, patting the scutched handfals.

'Dry as pepper – snapping, even.' Jagna glanced again at the old man with a smile, until a shiver ran through him. He flicked his whip and drove off, turning back again and again to look at her, though she was no longer visible, but stood there still, in his mind's eye ...

'A fine hind of a lass ... just right,' he reflected.

CHAPTER 4

It was Sunday – a quiet, sunlit, gossamer-strewn September day.

Out on the stubble just behind the barn, all Boryna's livestock was out grazing today, while under the tall bulging hayrick, surrounded by a green brush of young rye, grown from the seed spilled at stacking, lay Kuba, keeping an eye on the livestock and at the same teaching Witek his prayers – scolding him frequently and even prodding him with his crop, for the boy stumbled often, his eyes darting towards the orchards.

'Mind what I'm saying, it's a prayer,' he admonished him sternly.

'I am, Kuba, I am.'

'Why are you gawking at the orchards, then?'

'Looks like there's apples still at the Kłabs' ...'

'Eat 'em, would you! Planted 'em did you, eh? Again: "I believe".'

'Nor did you raise the partridges, but you take a whole flock.'

'Idiot! The apples belong to the Kłabs, but the birds are the Lord's, see!'

'But you took 'em from the squire's field.'

'The field's the Lord's too. Hark at him, the know-it-all. Again: "I believe".'

The boy recited quickly, his knees aching from kneeling, but he couldn't resist ...

'Looks like the filly's getting into Michałowa's clover,' he shouted, ready to run.

'Never mind the filly, pay attention to the prayer ...'

Witek finished at last but could stand it no longer. He sat back on his heels, squirming this way and that, and spying a band of sparrows at the plums, hurled a clod at them and hurriedly beat his breast.

'And the off'ring: swallowed it like a snow pear, have you?'

Witek repeated the prayer of offering and with great relief set about waking Łapa and frolicking with him.

'Ha, he'd be forever romping, like a silly calf,' observed Kuba.

'Are you taking the birds to the priest?'

'I am ...'

'We could roast 'em outside.'

'Go roast yourself some potatoes. Whatever next!'

'They're off to church already!' Witek called, spying a flash of red aprons on the road through the trees and fences. The sun was pretty warm now, so that all the cottage doors and windows were thrown open on every side: some people were still washing at benches by the walls, or brushing and plaiting their hair. Sunday clothes that had lain crumpled in chests all week were shaken out, and some folk were already on their way, so that here and there – like red poppies, or the yellow dahlias that flowered against the walls, or marigolds or nasturtiums – came the women all dressed up, girls and children, farmers in white capotes, like great sheaves of rye, all heading slowly for church along the road that skirted the great golden bowl of the pond, which reflected the sun until it dazzled the eyes.

And the bells pealed with the joyful voice of Sunday, of rest and prayer.

Kuba had meant to wait for the bells to finish, but in his impatience he stowed the bundle of birds under his capote and said:

'Witek, when the bells are done, herd the cattle into the byre and come to church.'

He set off as fast he could with his bad limp, along the path running beside the orchards, so carpeted with yellow poplar leaves it was like walking over a saffron-coloured kilim.

The presbytery stood opposite the church, separated from it only by the road and set deep in a great garden, still full of green pears and ruddy apples. Kuba stopped helplessly in front of the porch, overgrown with reddening vines, and peeked in timidly through the wide-open windows and hallway. And since he dared not go in, he retreated instead to a great flowerbed full of roses, stock and asters from which there issued a sweet, intoxicating scent; white doves were wandering over the green, mossy roof above him and fluttering down to the porch.

The priest was walking about the garden with his breviary in his hand, but stopped to shake first the pear and then the apple trees, so that the fruit could be heard thudding heavily on to the ground. He was gathering them in the skirts of his cassock to carry them to the house when Kuba waylaid him and humbly clasped his knees.

'What's this? Ah ... Boryna's Kuba.'

'Aye ... I've brought you some partridges, Father.'

'God bless you. Come with me.'

Kuba entered the hallway but remained on the threshold, as he dared not go into the room. He merely peered through the open doorway at the pictures hanging on the walls and crossed himself piously and sighed, feeling so bedazzled by all this loveliness that tears came to his eyes and he longed desperately to say a prayer, but feared to kneel on the shining, slippery floor and besmear it.

The priest emerged quickly, however, and handed him a zloty, ¹ saying:

'God bless you, Kuba – you're a good man and pious, at church every Sunday.'

Kuba clasped the priest's legs again, but so stunned with joy was he that he scarcely knew how he came to find himself on the road again ...

'Well, I'll ... a few little birds and all this money! The dear reverend!' he whispered, gazing at the coin. He had often brought the priest a bird of some kind, or a hare, a few mushrooms, but he'd never been given so much; a ten-groszy coin at most, or a good word ... But today! ... Dear Jesus! A whole zloty and he'd been asked inside, and so many kind words spoken ... Jesus! Till something caught at his throat and the tears trickled freely from his eyes, and his heart burned as though someone had pushed a brand into his bosom ...

'Only the priest respects 'un, only him! ... God bless him, and the Lady of Częstochowa ... You're a good gentleman, good you are ... The whole village: hands, farmers, all of 'em, call 'un a cripple, a dolt, a sponger. Not one has a good word, not one has a drop of pity – excepting the horses or dogs maybe – and me born here too ... son of a farmer ... no foundling ... no vagrant, but a true Christian, a Catholic ...'

Kuba lifted his head higher and prouder with every step, drew himself up as best he could and looked down almost defiantly on the world, at the people entering the graveyard and at the horses standing by the carts at the wall. He pulled his cap on to his matted head and made for the church, slow and dignified, like a proper farmer, hooking his thumbs in his belt and sweeping his crooked leg along and raising a dust cloud behind him.

He did not remain in the porch today, as befitted him, oh no, but firmly pushed his way through the throng and made straight for the high altar – right to where only farmers took their places, where Boryna and the Voyt himself stood, and those who carried the baldachin over the priest, or those who stood holding candles like stanchions by the altar during the Elevation.

They looked at him in astonishment and dismay, and he heard many a harsh word and caught looks such as a dog might earn, squeezing in where it's not been summoned. But Kuba took no notice today; he gripped the coin in his fist and his soul was as full of goodness and sweetness as though he'd just been to confession, at the very least.

The service began. He knelt close to the rail and sang with the rest, gazing devotedly at the altar with God the Father at the top, a stern grey Master, the very image of the squire at Drzazgowa Wola, and right in the middle, the Lady of Częstochowa, arrayed in gold, was looking down at him, and all around were glittering golden, glowing candles and bunches of red paper flowers ...

Gilded halos above austere holy faces leaned from the walls and colourful windows, and streaks of gold, purple and violet fell like a rainbow across his head and face, as though he were completely immersed in the pond before sunset when the sun strikes the water. And he felt as though he were in heaven among this loveliness, so that he dared not move but only knelt, staring into the dark, sweet motherly face of the Lady of Częstochowa, repeating prayer after prayer with his parched lips and singing so fervently, with all the force of a faithful soul and a heart so full of ecstasy, that his dry grating voice was the most resonant of all.

'Kuba, you're bleating like a Jewish goat!' someone whispered at his side.

'For the Lord Jesus and Our Lady,' he muttered, pausing, for the church had grown silent.

The priest mounted the pulpit and everyone raised their heads and gazed at him in his white surplice as he leaned over the people and read the Gospel. In the light and colours flowing over him from the windows, he looked to them like an angel floating on a rainbow. The priest spoke long and fiercely so that many a soul sighed with a heart full of remorse, many a tear fell, while others lowered their eyes, searching their consciences repentantly and promising to mend their ways ... And Kuba stared at the priest as though at a holy picture until he felt amazed that this was the same good gentleman who had spoken to him and given him a zloty. For now he looked like an archangel in a fiery chariot of light: his face had grown pale, his eyes flashed like lightning when he began to raise his voice and berate the people for their sins, their avarice, their drunkenness, their debauchery, the wrongs they had inflicted, their neglect of the old folk, their godlessness! And he exhorted them in a great voice to come to their senses: he begged, beseeched and pleaded with them, until Kuba could bear it no longer and began to tremble inside with guilt, remorse and contrition for all these sins, and burst into sobs and all the folk after him – women and even farmers – so that the sound of lamenting, snivelling and wiping of noses filled the church, and when

the priest turned to the altar with a prayer of penitence and fell to his knees, the whole church groaned as one, like a forest bent by a storm. They fell to the ground on their faces until the dust flew and shrouded those contrite hearts like a cloud as they called on the Lord with sighs and cries for mercy.

And then all was silence, the silence of prayerful and heartfelt communing with the Lord, for the High Mass had begun. The organ boomed in a muffled deep and suppliant voice until Kuba's soul swooned with bliss and untold happiness ...

Then the priest's voice rose suddenly from the altar and a penetrating stream of sacred sounds flowed over the bowed heads. The little bells rang a short salvo and fragrant pillars of incense assailed those kneeling in prayer and enveloped them as though in a cloud, filling Kuba with such delight that he could only sigh and spread his arms, beat his breast and float in sweet helplessness, while the murmur of prayers, sighs, sudden cries and intermittent moans, fervent gasps, the lights, smoke and the sound of the organ plunged him as though into a holy dream, as though into abandonment.

'Jesus, my dear Jesus!' he whispered, dazzled and stunned, and he gripped the zloty tightly in his fist, for after the Elevation, when Ambrozy began to come round collecting for the candles, rattling the plate to make sure of being heard, Kuba got up, tossed in his coin and then took his time, like the farmers did, picking out his change of six-and-twenty groszy.²

'God bless,' he heard with satisfaction.

And when they were distributing candles, for there was Exposition³ after the service and a procession, Kuba stretched out his hand boldly, and though he longed desperately to take a whole one, he met the severe reproving look of Dominikowa, who was standing close by with Jagna, and he took but the smallest, almost a stub. He lit it quickly, for the priest was already seizing the monstrance and turning to face the people, so that they fell on their faces. Intoning the hymn, the priest slowly descended the altar steps and took the path that had suddenly opened up as the crowd parted, his way lined with faces, resounding with song and droning voices, and glowing with flickering flames and vivid colours. As the procession moved off, the organ boomed, the bells began their rhythmic jangling and the people joined in and sang with a single mighty voice of faith, while, at the head of the throng, in whorls of flickering light, the silver cross glittered, the processional holy paintings bobbed, all decked in tulle and flowers and tinsel crowns, and at the great doors where the sun burst through the clouds of incense, the tilting banners unfurled in the wind, like green-and-purple birds flapping their wings.

The procession circled the church.

Shielding his candle with one hand, Kuba stubbornly edged closer to the priest under the red baldachin carried by Boryna, the blacksmith, the Voyt and Tomasz Kłab. Beneath it beamed the golden monstrance, all aflame in the sun, so that the pale, transparent sacred Host could be seen through its glass centre ... So dazed was he that he kept stumbling and treading on feet.

'Watch out, you clod!'

'Oaf, stupid cripple!' they snapped, jostling him repeatedly.

He was deaf to all of it. The people's singing resounded with a mighty voice; rising like a pillar, like a wave, it seemed to flow and break against the pale sun. The bronze mouths of the bells pealed ceaselessly, until the lindens and maples shook and now and again a red leaf would break free and fall upon the people's heads like a startled bird, and high, high above the procession, above the tips of the stooping trees, above the church tower, wheeled a flock of flustered doves ...

After the service, folk poured into the graveyard beside the church. Kuba followed the rest, but did not hurry home today, though he knew there would be meat for dinner from the slaughtered cow – no, he stood about, chatted with his cronies, and edged towards his masters, for Antek and his wife were standing in the crowd and conversing, as was the custom after Sunday High Mass.

In another group that had gathered on the road beyond the gates, the blacksmith took the lead. A big fellow, he was dressed entirely in the fashion of the town, with his black capote, spotted with candle wax across the shoulders, and a dark-blue peaked cap. He wore his trousers over his boots and a silver watch-chain on his waistcoat.⁴ His face was red and he had ruddy whiskers and curly hair. He talked loudly and laughed till he was guffawing, for he was the village wit and God help anyone who got the sharp end of his tongue. Boryna only glanced at him and pricked up his ears, for he was wary of his talk – the blacksmith would not spare even kin, never mind a father-in-law with whom he was at war over his wife's dowry – but he could make nothing out and in any case his eye was caught by the sight of Dominikowa and Jagna coming out of church. They walked slowly, as there was a sizeable crowd in the graveyard, and were greeting first one neighbour then another, exchanging a word here and there, for though everyone knew each other and were related, kinfolk and from a single village, with often only a baulk and no fence dividing them, still it was always pleasant and proper to exchange a word outside church ...

Dominikowa held forth about the good father in a low reverential voice while Jagna looked about at the people, and since she matched the tallest of the men in height and was dressed up to the nines today, the farmhands could not tear their eyes away and grinned at her as they stood huddled at the gates, puffing on their cigarettes. She was a beauty all right, and smart, and with a figure unmatched by that of any woman from any manor.

The girls and married women passing by eyed her with envy, or simply stopped to feast their eyes on her sumptuous striped woollen skirt that shimmered so brilliantly, or her black boots laced right up her white stockings with red shoestrings, or at her bodice of green velvet, embroidered so richly in gold that it dazzled the eyes, or the strings of amber encircling her full white neck, and beads too, from which a bunch of many-coloured ribbons hung down her back and, when she moved, streamed after her like a rainbow.

But Jagna did not see the envious glances. Her blue eyes wandered over their heads and meeting Antek's gaze, now fixed upon her, she blushed and, tugging at her mother's sleeve, set off without waiting.

'Jagna, wait!' her mother cried after her, as she said hello to Boryna.

Jagna was forced to pause on the road, as the lads swarmed around her and began to greet her and to nettle Kuba, who was following behind, gazing upon her as at a picture.

Kuba only spat and made for home, for the masters were beginning to leave and it was time to check the horses.

'Pretty as a picture!' he exclaimed unwittingly, sitting on the porch.

'Who, Kuba?' asked Józia, preparing the dinner.⁵

He lowered his eyes, embarrassed and afraid they might guess.

But as the dinner was long and lavish, he soon forgot about it. There was meat and there was cabbage-with-peas, and chicken soup with potatoes and, to round it off, a plentiful bowl of barley groats, roasted with pork fat.

They ate in silence, slowly and gravely, and did not exchange a word nor pause to relish the food until they'd satisfied their initial hunger.

As Józia was cook today, she perched on the edge of the bench from time to time and ate hurriedly, one eye on the emptying bowls and bringing out the pans to add more, so that they couldn't complain the light of day was visible in the basins.

The weather was warm and peaceful, so they were eating on the porch.

Lapa scurried about and yelped, or rubbed against their legs and looked into the bowls, until someone threw him a morsel, which he bore away under the bench, or, overjoyed at the presence of his masters and at hearing them call his name, he'd bark happily and race after the sparrows alighting on the fences, waiting for crumbs.

Passers-by would hail them from the road, to which they'd chorus a reply.

'So you took the priest some birds?' Boryna said.

'I did, I did!' Kuba put down his spoon and began to relate how the priest had ushered him in, how beautiful it was, and so many books.

'Whenever will he read 'em all?' Józia piped up.

'When? In the evenings! He walks about the rooms, sips his tea and is forever reading.'

'Aye ... likely all godly books,' Kuba put in.

'Well they'll not be ABCs.'

'And the lackey brings a stack o' newspapers every day,'⁶ added Hanka.

'Because they write what happens in the world in the papers,' Antek spoke up.

'The blacksmith and miller take a paper'⁷ too.'

'Eh ... a paper for the blacksmith's kind!' Boryna said, sneering.

'Exact same as the priest's,' Antek said sharply.

'You know, do you? Read it, have you?' retorted Boryna.

'I do know, and I have, more than once!' said Antek.

'And you're none the wiser for rubbing elbows with the blacksmith.'

'The only wise 'un in Father's eyes is the man with at least fifteen morgen and a *menda*'⁸ of cows.'

'Shut your mouth, while my mood's still good! Any excuse to bicker! The bread's swelling your stomach, I see ... my bread ...'

'It's sticking in my throat, like a bone ...'

'Find something better, then. You can eat sweet rolls on Hanka's three morgen.'

'I'll eat potatoes happily enough, and with no one reproaching me.'

'Nor do I reproach you.'

'Who then, if not you? I slave like an ox, and not a good word do I hear.'

'Grass is always greener somewhere else – no need to lift a finger, everything's for free ...'

'It's better, for sure.'

'Go give it a try, then.'

'I'm not going with empty hands.'

'I'll give you a stick, to chase off the dogs.'

'Father!' yelled Antek, leaping up from the bench, but back down he went at once, as Hanka had caught him about the waist.

The old man glared at him threateningly, crossed himself since the meal was over and, heading for his chamber, declared firmly:

'I'll not be pensioned off to you, oh no!'

They quickly dispersed, with only Antek left on the porch, lost in thought. Kuba led the horses on to the mown clover field behind the barn and stretched out under the hayrick to have a sleep, but sleep wouldn't come, and the food weighed heavily in his belly along with the thought of how many birds he'd shoot if he had a rifle, and a hare maybe, so that every Sunday he'd have something for the good father. The blacksmith could make a shotgun, for hadn't he knocked one together for the miller that the whole village could hear when he fired it in the woods!

'A craftsman, by heck! But he'll want five roubles for one of those!' he pondered. 'And where to get 'em? Winter's coming, there's a sheepskin to buy and my boots won't hold out beyond Yuletide ... Aye, I'm owed ten roubles and two garments, breeches and a shirt ... a sheepskin, that's five – it'll be a short 'un ... boots, happen three, and a cap'd be handy ... and a rouble's needed for the priest for a Mass for the dead ... Dammit, there'll be nothing left!' He spat and began to pick crumbs of tobacco from his waistcoat pockets when he came upon the coins he'd forgotten about during dinner ...

'Well, here's some cash!' He suddenly felt wide awake; a distant strain of music reached him from the inn and the faint echo of shouts.

'Dancing they are, the villains, and drinking vodka, and puffing cigarettes!' He sighed and lay down on his stomach again and, watching the fettered horses standing in a huddle, nibbling each other's flanks, he wondered if come evening he too should drop by at the inn and get himself some tobacco and take a quick peek at the merrymaking. Turning over the coins again and again, he glanced up at the sun. Still high in the sky, it was moving westward so slowly today, as though it too were taking a wee Sunday rest ... The inn was beckoning so that he could barely resist; he shifted from side to side and groaned with longing, but didn't set off straight away, for just at that moment Antek and Hanka came out from behind the barn and took the baulk between the fields.

Antek went ahead and Hanka behind him, the boy in her arms. They spoke from time to time and walked slowly, Antek constantly reaching down to the ground to touch the sprouting blades.

'Coming up thick as a brush,' he muttered as he cast his eyes over the morgen that he'd sowed in return for working for his father.

'Thick, but Father's is better, coming up like yon forest!' said Hanka looking at the neighbouring fields.

'Soil's been better manured.'

'Three cows would do to feed the land.'

'And our own horse.'

'And there'd be some over to sell. But this? Father counts every husk, every bit o' peel, and makes a song and dance of it.'

'And throws every little thing in your face!'

They fell silent, for a sense of injustice flooded their hearts with resentment, anger and dull pangs of revolt.

'It'd come to eight morgen no more!' he blurted.

'No more, for sure. There's Józka, after all and the blacksmith and Grzela and us,' she listed.

'Blacksmith could be paid off and we'd stay in the cottage with fifteen morgen ...'

'Paid off with what?' she wailed, until a growing sense of helplessness made the tears trickle down her face as she cast her eyes over her father-in-law's fields, land pure as gold and all someone else's ... not theirs ...

'Don't blub, stupid, eight morgen of it's ours, anyroad ...'

'If it were just half, with the house and that cabbage field!' She gestured to the left, towards the meadows where long strips of cabbages showed blue.

They headed in that direction and sat under the bushes at the edge of the meadows. Hanka nursed the child, who had started to cry, and Antek rolled and lit a cigarette, staring gloomily ahead ... He did not tell his wife what was eating him inside, or weighed on his heart like a burning coal, for he could neither tell it, nor she grasp the telling ...

It was the usual way with women; they'd neither wit nor resource themselves, but subsisted like the shadow a fellow cast ...

'Farm, children, friends – that's her whole world. All women are like that, all of 'em,' he thought to himself bitterly until he felt a pang in his heart. 'That bird flying over the wetlands has it better than a man ... What cares does it have? Flies about singing, the Lord Jesus sows it a field, it's got plenty to gather and eat ...'

'It's not like he's short of cash, is it?' Hanka began.

'Indeed!'

'He got Józka some beads that could've bought a whole cow and he's forever sending money to Grzela in the army.'

'He is.'

'But it's not fair for the rest of us! And he's got your mother's clothes buried in a chest and won't even give us a peek ... And such woollen skirts there are, and scarves and caps and beads,' and she set about listing all the wares and her grievances, and injustices, and hopes, and Antek sat in stubborn silence until she tugged at his arm impatiently.

'You sleeping?'

'I'm listening – go on and keep prattling, if it makes you feel better! Tell me when you're done ...'

Hanka, who was given to weeping and had bottled up much in her soul, burst into tears and started to berate him that he talked to her like some wench and cared nothing for her or the children.

Until Antek leapt to his feet and cried mockingly:

'Bawl away – those there crows'll hear and feel sorry for you!' He threw a glance at the crows flying over the meadows, pulled down his cap and strode off to the village ...

'Antek! Antek!' she called after him miserably, but he did not turn around.

She wrapped up the little boy and walked, sobbing, along the baulks back to the house: her heart was heavy – no one to talk to, no one to listen to her woes. And a person had forever to live by their lonesome, couldn't even drop in at a neighbour's and lighten their spirits with a chat. As if Antek would let her have a friend! Nothing, just sit in the house and slave and toil, and not one kind word do you hear! Other girls get to go to the inn or to weddings, but that Antek ... can you please him? Sometimes he was sweet as pie ... but then he'd barely grunt a word for whole weeks at a time and not glance at you once, just ponder and ponder ... True, he had cause! For couldn't Father sign over the land already, wasn't it time for the old man to be pensioned? Why, she'd pamper him better than her own flesh and blood ...

She wanted to join Kuba, but he just leaned back against the hayrick and pretended to be sleeping, though the sun was shining straight in his eyes. Not until she'd vanished round the corner of the barn did he brush off the straw and meander slowly through the orchards to the inn – the coins were burning a hole in his pocket ...

The inn stood at the end of the village, beyond the presbytery at the head of the poplar road. There was hardly anyone inside; music struck up from time to time, but no one was dancing yet, it was too early, and the young preferred to romp in the orchard or loiter on the driveway and by the walls where a fair few girls and women were sitting on freshly cut, still-yellow timber. The great chamber with its smoky black ceiling was almost empty; the red light of the setting sun filtered so feebly through the small scorched panes that only a faint streak trailed across the well-trodden floor, while gloom gathered in the corners. There were people sitting at the tables against the walls but who he could not tell.

Only Ambrozcy stood by the window with a candle-bearer from the confraternity,⁹ a bottle in his hand – they were drinking steadily to each other and chatting ...

The bass viol hummed like a bumblebee that blunders into a room and buzzes as it flies, while a fiddle would give a sudden high-pitched squeal, like a little decoy bird, and a tabour rattled and jangled ... but presently the place fell silent.

Kuba went straight to the bar where Jankiel was sitting in just his shirtsleeves and yarmulke,¹⁰ since it was warm, stroking his grey beard and swaying as he read a book, bringing his eyes down close to the pages.

Kuba deliberated, shifting from foot to foot as he counted his money and scratched his matted head. He stood there so long that Jankiel gave him a look and, not ceasing his swaying and praying, clinked the glasses once and twice ...

'A pint, but a strong one!' Kuba ordered at last.

Jankiel poured a measure into a bottle in silence and stretched out his left hand for the money ...

'In a glass?'¹¹ he asked, sweeping the tarnished coppers into a basket.

'Well, not in my boot!'

Kuba removed himself to the very end of the bar, drank his first glass, spat and looked about the inn; he drank another, peered at the little bottle under the light and slammed it down hard.

'Give us another, and some baccy!' he declared more boldly, for a blissful warmth had washed through him after the vodka and a strange energy coursed through his bones.

'Is it pay day, Kuba?'

'As if – not New Year, is it?'

'Maybe some arak?'¹²

'Nay ... I'm short ...' he counted the money and glanced mournfully at the flask of arak.

'You'll take it on tick, Kuba, if I know you!'

'I will not; "Who runs on tick will lose his boots quick,"' he retorted sharply.

Jankiel placed the flask of arak before him all the same.

Kuba resisted, and was just about to leave, but damn it if the arak had such a fragrance that it tickled his nose and he gave up the struggle and drank without a second thought.

'You made a grosz or two in the forest?' asked Jankiel patiently.

'Not in the forest ... the birds what I caught in a snare. I took six of 'em to the good father and he gave me a zloty ...'

'A zloty for six? I would give Kuba ten groszy apiece.'

'You what? Are partridges kosher, then?' He was astounded.

'Kuba needn't trouble his head over that ... Just bring me many, and there'll be a ten-groszy piece in the hand for each one. And I'll throw in this liquor to seal it, yes?'

'And Jankiel will pay a whole ten groszy for each?'

'My word is not a gust of wind. For those six ... Kuba would have not two pints of ordinary vodka,¹³ but four of arak with herring, a roll and a packet of baccy ... Do you hear, Kuba?'

'Aye ... four pints of arak with herring ... aye, I'm no fool, I can reckon ... absolutely true! Four pints of arak ... and baccy, and rolls ... and a whole herring ...' The vodka was already making his head swim.

'You'll bring them, Kuba?'

'Four pints ... and herring ... and ... I will. Hang it, if I had a shotgun ...' he declared, suddenly alert, and again began to reckon: 'A sheepskin, fr'instance, about five roubles – shoes would be good – about three ... nay, *nie chwaci*¹⁴ ... and blacksmith'd want five or so roubles for a shotgun ... as much again as Rafal ... nay,' he thought aloud.

Jankiel made quick calculations with a chalk and whispered quietly in his ear:

'Could Kuba shoot a deer?'

'Ha, well not with my fist, but I'd get the bastard with a shotgun!'

'Kuba knows how to shoot?'

'Jankiel is a Jew, so he's not heard, but everyone in the village knows I used to go about the forest¹⁵ with the squires, and that's how this leg were shot, so aye, I know how.'

'I'll get a shotgun, and powder, and whatever is needed ... and Kuba will bring what he shoots to me! For a deer, I'll give a whole rouble ... do you hear? A whole rouble! For the powder, fifteen kopecks apiece – I'll deduct it. Any damage to the shotgun and Kuba will bring a quart¹⁶ of oats ...'

'A rouble a deer ... and fifteen from me for the powder ... a whole rouble! How much again?'

Jankiel listed everything again in detail.

'Oats? I cannot be taking 'em from the horses' mouths.' That much he'd understood.

'Why from the horses! Boryna has oats elsewhere.'

'But that's ...' he gaped and deliberated.

'Everyone does it! Where does Kuba think the farmhands get their money? Everyone wants baccy and a glass of vodka and a dance come Sunday! How else would they get it?'

'What? Am I a thief or what, you mangy dog?' he thundered suddenly, beating his fist on the table so that the glasses danced.

'Don't you jump down my throat! Pay up and go to the devil!'

But Kuba did not pay and did not go. He had no money left and now he owed the Jew ... so he leaned heavily on the bar and began calculating sleepily, while Jankiel, mollified, poured him another drink, but pure arak now ... and said not a word.

Meanwhile, more and more folk began to arrive, for the dusk had deepened, the lamps were lit, the music struck up more briskly and the place grew noisier. People crowded at the bar, against the walls or simply in the middle of the room, debating, chatting, complaining, and toasting each other here and there, though rarely, for they hadn't come to drink, but to mingle with their neighbours, chew the cud, listen to the fiddle and the bass viol, and hear something new. It was Sunday after all, so no sin to rest or satisfy one's curiosity or even to take a drink with a friend ... the good father himself did not forbid it, so long as all was decent and there was no offence to God ... After all, even a beast, for example, is glad to rest, and so it should after work. So the older farmers too sat down at the tables and some of the women, like hollyhocks in bloom in their red woollen skirts and shawls, and since all were talking at once, the inn was humming like a forest, loud with the tapping of feet like the beating of flails on the threshing floor, and the cavorting voice of the fiddle singing: '*And who will come follow me, follow me, follow ...*'

'*I will ... oh I will ... yes, I ...*' grunted the groaning bass viol while the tabour shook and chuckled, capered and raised a racket with its little cymbals.

Not many were dancing, but people tapped their feet so smartly the floorboards creaked and the tables shook so that flasks jingled and glasses toppled over ... Yet there was not much enthusiasm, for it was no great occasion, like a wedding or betrothal ... They danced a little, carelessly, for the fun of it, to stretch their legs and backs. Only the lads destined for the army that autumn revelled more wildly and drank for consolation, which was no surprise, for they were to be driven out into the great wide world, among strangers.¹⁷ The Voyt's brother was the loudest of them, and hard on his heels came Marcin Bialek, Tomek Sikora and Pawel Boryna, cousin to Antek. The last-mentioned, too, had turned up at the inn at dusk, except that he did not dance today, but sat in the snug with the blacksmith and others, and there was Franek from the miller's, curly-haired, short and stocky and the greatest blowhard, a lecher and mocker and so voracious for the girls that he often ended up with a scratched and beaten mug. But since today he'd got drunk immediately, like some godless creature, he just stood by the bar with the organist's fat Magda, who was in her sixth month.

The good priest had already rebuked him from the pulpit and urged him to wed, but Franek wasn't listening: he was due to report to the army in the autumn, so what was a lass to him ... Magda was trying to draw him into a corner, to the fireside, saying something to him in a tearful voice, while he kept replying:

'Silly fool! I never chased after you ... I'll pay for the christening and toss you a rouble when I feel like it!' Addled with drink, he pushed her so hard she plumped down at the fireside beside Kuba, who was sleeping in the ashes, feet towards the room – and there she sat, sobbing quietly, while Franek went off for another drink and to pull a girl on to the dance floor. But the farmers' daughters would not go, for what was a miller? Little more than a farmhand. Nor would the common girls stand for his soused and swinish ways when dancing, so he just spat and began to kiss Ambrozy and the farmers drunkenly. Since they had grain waiting at the mill, they ignored it and stood him a drink ...

'Drink up, Franek, and grind the grain more quickly. My woman's plaguing me that she hasn't a scrap of flour to make the dumplings.'

'And mine is forever rattling on about groats.'

'And bran for the mangers,' put in a third.

Franek drank, reassuring them and boasting loudly that everything in the mill was down to him, that the miller had to mind what he said, else he knew tricks that'd make bugs breed in the bins ... the water dry up ... the fish die. He need only puff on the pond and the flour would dwindle so that you'd not make even a pancake ...

'I'd pluck those ram's curls clean out if you tried that on me!' yelled Jagustynka, who was always to be found where folk were gathering, for though she did not drink as she rarely had a grosz to her name, sometimes a friend would stand her a pint, and a cousin another, for they feared her sharp tongue. So Franek too, though drunk, took fright and fell silent, for she knew a thing or two about him and how he ran the mill. With a drink inside her now, she stood arms akimbo, tapping her feet to the rhythm, and called out:

'They're dancing like flies in tar! Come on, Ewka, move yourself. Up and about at night and now she's asleep on her feet. Tomek! Faster! That hindquarter you sold Jankiel is weighing on you, is it? Never you fear, your father don't know yet. Marysia! You just carry on hanging about with them recruits – go on, and you can ask me to be godmother ...'

And so she continued, needling each dancer in turn. She knew no limits and was angry at everyone, that her children had wronged her, that she was forced to work in her old age, but since no one answered, she finished unburdening herself and went to the snug, where the blacksmith and Antek and some of the younger farmers were sitting.

A lamp was hanging from the black beams and its dull yellow light lit up the fair tousled heads – they sat around a table, resting heavily on their elbows, all eyes fixed on the blacksmith who, leaning over, red-faced, with his arms spread wide and thumping his fist, was saying in a low voice:

'I'm telling the truth, that's how it stands written in the paper, clear as day. They don't live like we do out in the world, oh no! What have we got? Squire's master here, priest's master here, the government official's master here – and as for us, toil till you drop with hunger, and bow low to everyone so you don't catch it across the head.'

'And not enough land. Before long there'll not be a field each!'

'And squire's got more than two villages together.'

'At court yesterday there were talk of distributing new plots.'

'Which ones?'

'Manor ones o' course!'

'Oh yes? I suppose you gave the land to the squire since you're taking it back! Making free with other's property already,' cried Jagustynka, leaning over them with a laugh.

'And they govern themselves,' the blacksmith continued, ignoring this women's talk, 'and all go to school, and live as gentlemen, in manors.'

'Where's this?' she asked Antek, who had just sat down at the edge of the group.

'In warm countries'¹⁸ he retorted.

'Well, why hasn't the blacksmith gone if it's that fine, eh? That grimy sod lies like a dog, hoodwinks you all and you fools believe it!' she cried heatedly.

'I'm telling you nicely: take yourself off where you came from, Jagustynka.'

'I will not! The inn's for everyone, and my three groszy are as good as yours! Look at him, Mister Teacher, serving Jews, hobnobbing with officials, stands cap in hand before the squire and they believe him! Loudmouth. Oh, I know ...' but she did not finish, as the blacksmith seized her firmly under the ribs, pushed open the door with his foot and slung her into the main chamber, where she sprawled right down the middle of the floor.

She did not protest at all, just got up and declared cheerily:

'Strong as a horse, the ruffian; I could do with one like that.'

The people burst out laughing, and she left immediately, railing under her breath.

But the inn was emptying now, the music faded, people were dispersing to their homes. They stood in little groups in front of the inn, for it was a warm, bright evening and the moon shone. Only the recruits were left, drinking themselves into a stupor and clamouring, while Ambrozy, drunk as a beast, staggered into the middle of the road, singing and tottering from side to side.

The rest emerged from the snug, the blacksmith at their head.

Then, when Jankiel began putting out the lights, the recruits tumbled out too, took each other firmly by the arm and set off along the road, singing at the tops of their voices, until the dogs began to howl and someone looked out from a cottage here and there. Only Kuba remained. He went on sleeping in the ashes so soundly that Jankiel had to wake him, but the farmhand didn't

want to get up; he kicked and thrashed the air grunting: 'Go away, you Jew. I'll sleep here if I want ... a farmer, I am, I've a will of my own, and you're a yella scurvy dog!' ¹⁹

A bucket of water helped him to his feet and sobered him up a little, except he learned with alarm and amazement that he'd drunk a whole rouble away – which he owed ...

'What? Two pints with arak – a whole herring – baccy – and two more pints – that's a whole rouble already? What? Two ...' he raved.

Jankiel convinced him at last and they agreed on the shotgun – the Jew was to bring one from the fair – and they sealed the agreement with sweet spirits ...

But Kuba refused to promise the oats.

'Kuba's father was no thief, and his son won't be neither.'

'Off with you, get some sleep ... I still have prayers to say.'

'Hark at him! The speculator. Persuading a man to thief and then off saying his prayers,' he muttered, heading home, recollecting and calculating as he went, for no way could he account for drinking a whole rouble away, but as he hadn't sobered up yet and the fresh air had befuddled him, he swayed a little, floundering against the fences from time to time, or on to the timber that lay in front of a cottage here and there, and swore ...

'Devil twist your guts, you bastards! Scoundrels, leaving the road in a state! Drunk, you were ... lechers ... the good father rebuking 'em in vain ... the father ...' Here he deliberated and pondered a long while, until finally realization dawned and remorse came over him so that he stopped dead, looked about, bent down to hunt for some hard thing ... but then forgot and, clutching his matted locks, began to thump his own face with his fist, shouting: 'A drunk you are, a poxy swine! I'll take yer to the father, let him scold you in front of everyone for the dog and drunk that you are – twice two pints ... a whole rouble drunk away ... worse than a beast ... you ...'

And overcome with misery, he sat down abruptly by the roadside and burst into tears.

A great bright moon floated in the dark expanses and the stars dotting the sky glimmered like silver nails; grey mist spooled in wisps of yarn above the village and shrouded the waters like a veil. The unfathomable silence of the autumn night embraced the world, interrupted only by snatches of song from returning inngoers or by the barking of dogs.

On the road in front of the inn, Ambrozy staggered from side to side, still singing ceaselessly, until he sobered up:

'Mary, oh my Mary!

Whose ale are you brewing?

Whose ale are you brewing?

O Mary, Mary mine!

CHAPTER 5

Autumn was well on its way.

Pallid days trailed across empty, silent fields and faded into the forest, growing ever paler, ever quieter – like the sacred Host in the dying light of votive candles.

With every dawn the day rose more lazily, stiff with cold and thick with hoar frost, in the painful hush of the withering land. A wan, heavy sun bloomed from out of the depths, wreathed in flocks of crows and jackdaws that had taken wing somewhere beyond the break of day and now flew low over the fields, with long, dull, miserable cawing ... A sharp cold wind chased after them, ruffling the soupy waters, shrivelling any greenery that still lingered and snatching the last leaves from the poplars leaning over the roads, which trickled down quiet as tears – the cruel tears of the dying summer – and fell heavily to the ground.

With every dawn the villages woke a little later: the cattle left more lazily for pasture, the barn doors creaked more quietly, the low sound of voices was muffled by the empty torpor of the fields, and life itself rippled more gently and diffidently. Occasionally, in front of cottages or in the fields, people could be seen to stop suddenly and stare at length into the dim blue distance ... and even cattle raised their mighty horned heads from the yellowing grass and, chewing slowly, sank their gaze into the far, faraway expanses, while now and then a dull and mournful bellow would tumble about the empty fields.

With every dawn it grew gloomier and colder: the smoke from cottage chimneys threaded lower through the naked orchards, more birds descended upon the village to seek shelter in the barns and hayricks, and the crows perched on the ridgepoles and hung from the bare trees or circled the fields, cawing dully, as though singing a mournful song of winter.

The afternoons were sunny, but so mute and lifeless that the murmur of the forest reached them in a hollow rustling and the babble of the river echoed like painful sobbing, while traces of the Indian summer would spring up unexpectedly and vanish in the bitter-cold shadows of the cottages.

Those quiet afternoons were tinged with the sadness of dying: silence lay over the empty roads, and in the orchards stripped of leaves lurked a deep melancholy of both dread and desolation.

And often, ever more often, the skies were streaked with dark grey clouds, so that come early evening folk were already departing the fields as twilight descended ...

The last of the autumn tillage was under way. By the time some were finishing their last furrow it was completely dark and, heading home, they would glance back at the fields and bid them farewell with a sigh for the spring.

Early in the evening it would often rain, briefly still, but cold and lasting more frequently until dusk – a long autumnal dusk in which cottage windows blazed like golden flowers and the empty roads were glazed with puddles – and the cold wet night battered the walls and moaned in the orchards. Even the stork with a broken wing, who'd stayed behind and could be seen wading alone in the meadows, began coming to Boryna's hayrick and even to the yard itself, where Witek eagerly tossed him enticing morsels.

And increasingly beggars of all kinds began to haunt the village. There were the usual kind who went from door to door with a deep bag and a long prayer, but others, too, who had come all the way from holy places and knew Ostra Brama, Częstochowa and Kalwaria,¹ and would gladly spend a long evening recounting what was happening out in the world, and where and what marvels had taken place, and sometimes a wanderer might quietly appear who hailed from the Holy Land itself and reported such wonders, had seen such lands, sailed such enormous seas, and known so many adventures, that those listening piously were amazed and many found it hard to credit but all listened greedily even so, since everyone was glad to learn of something new, and the evenings were long, and you could sleep your fill on both flanks until dawn.

Hej! Autumn it was, late autumn!

No songs, nor merry shouts, nor chirping of birds, nor hallooing to be heard in the village – nothing; only the wind moaning in the thatch, only the drizzle glazing the windowpanes and the dull thumping of flails growing louder every day in the barns.

Lipce grew steadily more lifeless, like the fields round about. Grey, stripped, exhausted, they lay resting in the frozen quiet, like those small bare trees, twisted, mournful, slowly growing numb for the long, long winter ...

Autumn it was, winter's own mother.

Their one solace was that foul weather was not yet upon them, the roads had not turned to mud and the weather might hold until the fair to which all Lipce was going, as though it were a holiday. For the fair was to take place on St Kordula's Day,² a notable feast and the last now before Yuletide, so everyone was making ready.

For days there were deliberations in the village over what to sell – cattle, grain, the smaller livestock? And with winter on the way, there was plenty needing to be bought – clothing and tools, and all manner of things for the farms – so that the cottages were afluster with disputes and quarrels, for it was clear, of course, that no one was flush and ready money was ever harder to come by.

And taxes were due to be paid, and commune³ contributions to be made, and all manner of debts to each other to be met, many a pre-harvest loan, not to mention settling with the servants for some – and so much of it at once that even those with fifteen morgen sighed heavily over their calculations, with nothing left for it but to take a horse or cow to the fair, while best not to speak at all of the poorer among them.

So one fellow would lead a poor cow out of the byre, rub her soiled flanks clean with a fistful of straw and add some clover to the night feed, or boiled barley with potatoes, to swell her out a bit; while another would fix up an old, blind-as-blind bag-of-bones to just about pass for a horse. Others again would thresh doggedly whole days at a time to be ready for the fair.

At Boryna's, too, brisk preparations were afoot: the old man and Kuba finished threshing the wheat and, in the time remaining, Józka and Hanka fattened up the sow and picked out some goslings from those left for rearing. Antek and Witek, meanwhile, since rains were expected any day, drove to the forest to fetch brushwood for mulch and kindling, of which some went to the byre and the rest they stacked up against the house to lag the walls for winter.

And so the work continued apace until late into the final night before the fair. Not until the wheat was lying in sacks on the cart parked in the barn and everything was made ready for the morrow did they sit down together for the evening meal in Boryna's chamber.

A fire of spruce branches blazed and crackled cheerfully in the chimney, and they sat eating slowly and in silence, for, work-worn, no one felt like speaking, until finally, when they'd finished and the women had tidied away the bowls and pots from the bench, Boryna said, moving a little closer to the fire:

'We must be off before dawn!'

'Aye, no later,' Antek replied and set about greasing the harnesses. Kuba whittled swingles for the flails and Witek peeled potatoes for the morning, poking Łapa from time to time as he lay beside him, picking fleas out with his teeth.

The room fell silent, so that the fire spluttering and the crickets chirping behind the stove were all that could be heard, while, from the other side of the house, came the sound of splashing water and the clinking of pots as they were washed.

'Kuba, you'll stay in service here longer, eh?'

Kuba lowered the drawknife with which he was whittling and gazed into the fire so long that Boryna prompted him.

'Did you hear what I said?'

'I heard, I did, I'm just recalling that, true, I've met with no hurt here ... Aye, but still ...' he broke off in confusion.

'Józka, bring out the vodka and a bite,' the old man ordered. 'Are we to deliberate with dry tongues, like Jews?' And he moved a bench before the fire on which Józka quickly placed a bottle, a ring of sausage and some bread.

'Have a drink, Kuba, and say your piece.'

'God bless, master. I would stay, I would, only ... only ...'

'I can raise your wages!'

'That'd be handy, it would. My sheepskin's falling off me, and boots too, and I'd buy a new capote, 'stead of turning up at church like some beggar, and only as far as the vestibule, for how can 'un show up in front o' the altar dressed like this?'

'You didn't mind on Sunday since you pushed to the front with the best,' said Boryna sternly.

'Aye ... ha ... true,' he mumbled, sorely embarrassed, and his face flushed a deep red.

'And the reverend teaches that elders are to be respected. Drink on it, Kuba, and listen to what I say, and you'll mark yourself that a farmhand is not a farmer ... Each has his own different place and to each the Lord Jesus has allotted it. The Lord has allotted yours too, so mind it and do not cross the line. Don't push your way to the first place and don't raise yourself above the rest – for you'll be sinning gravely. The good father himself will tell you the same, that it must be this way, so that order's kept in the world. Do you mark me, Kuba?'

'I'm not a beast. I've a mind o' my own.'

'Then mind you do not raise yourself above the rest.'

'Eh, I only wanted to be closer to the altar ...'

'The Lord Jesus hears you from every corner, never fear. And why push among the first when everyone knows who you are?'

'Aye, aye ... if I were a farmer, I'd carry the baldachin I would, and lead the good father by the arm, and sit in the pews, and sing loud from the prayer book ... but since I'm no more than a farmhand, though son of a farmer, I have to stand in the vestibule and by the door, like the dogs,' he said sadly.

'That's how the world is ordered, it is, and your head won't change it.'

'Not mine, for sure, not mine.'

'Drink up, Kuba, and tell me what I'm to add to your wages.'

Kuba drank up, but as the vodka had befuddled him somewhat already, he got it into his head that he was sitting in the inn with the organist's Michal or some other fellow and they were merry and chatting at ease, man to man. He undid his capote, stretched out his legs, slammed his fist down on the bench and shouted:

'Four notes and a rouble in advance I'll have, and then I'll stay.'⁴

'I can see you're either drunk or wrong in the head!' cried Boryna, but Kuba was away in his thoughts and old dreams already and did not hear the master's voice in any case, and so he let his cramped soul expand, grow in purpose and self-assuredness such that he felt himself a farmer indeed.

'Four notes and another in advance, let 'em give, then I'll stay, and if not, then, son-of-a-bitch, I'll be off to the fair and find myself another place, as a wagon driver for a team even,⁵ at a manor. They know me, that I work hard and can set my hand to anything in house or field, just as many a farmer could learn something of cattle from me ... And if not, I'll shoot birds and take 'em to the good father or maybe Jankiel ... and if not ...'

'Well, I'll be ... hark at the old hobbler, kicking up his heels! Kuba!' the old man bellowed sharply.

Kuba fell silent, sober suddenly and dreams dispelled, but he did not lose his pride, for he began to become intransigent, and so, like it or not, Boryna had to add half a rouble here, a zloty there, until finally he'd promised three roubles more for the coming year and two shirts in down payment.

'Ho, ho! A fine rogue you turned out to be,' the old man exclaimed, drinking to the deal, despite his crossness at stumping up so much money, but there was no sense in hesitating, for Kuba was worth as much and more. A hard worker, he laboured for two, touched nothing on the farm and cared more for the livestock than for himself; crippled though he was and not that strong, he knew a thing or two about farming – you could depend on him completely, everything would be as it should, he would see to it and supervise any hired hand to boot.

They consulted a little more on this and that, and when they parted, Kuba spoke up timidly from the doorway:

'Three roubles and two shirts, agreed. Only ... only ... don't be selling the filly – she were born at my side, I wrapped her in my own sheepskin so she wouldn't take a chill ... I could not bear some Jew to be beating her or some town ragamuffin ... Don't be selling her, she's pure gold not a horse, obedient as a child ... a horse like that, a man's no more than a dog beside her ... don't be selling her ...'

'It never entered my head.'

'They were saying in the inn and I was worried ...'

'Hark at their bloody bleedin' hearts, always know best!'

Kuba would have clasped his legs with joy, but he did not dare, not he, so he pulled on his cap and left quickly since it was time for bed before tomorrow's fair.

And so the next day, before dawn, not long after the second crowing,⁶ all the roads and paths to Tymów were full of people.

Every living soul from the countryside around was descending upon the fair.

A heavy rain fell towards morning, but it cleared a little to the east, leaving the sky veiled in dark clouds. Grey mists hovered above the lowlands, soaked through like coarse linen, the roads sparkled with puddles, and here and there water squelched underfoot in the ruts.

From Lipce, too, folk had been setting off since early morning.

Along the poplar road behind the church and as far as the forest, a train of carts could be seen, inching along, such a throng was there; woollen skirts and peasants' capotes flashed past constantly, red and white by turn, along the verges and on either side of the road. It was as though the whole village had turned out, so many people were going. The poorer farmers went on foot, as did the women, farmhands, girls and hired hands, and the poorest of all – the seasonal labourers – trailed along too, for it was at the fair that people were taken on.

Some came to buy, some to sell and some just to see the fair.

One man led a wretched cow or a calf on a rope, another drove a sow and piglets that squealed and tore along so that he was forever chasing them and minding they didn't run under the cartwheels; some plodded by on their nags; others were herding shorn sheep; while here and there the streak of a white goose with its wings tied down or the comb of a cockerel peeped out from under a woman's apron ... And the carts rolling by were well loaded too: from under the hay or a wicker frame a snout would appear and a porker would oink until the geese began gagging in alarm and the dogs trotting along at people's sides would start barking at the carts. And so it went the whole way along, and though the road was wide, there was barely room for all and some had to step down on to the furrows in the fields.

It was broad day, the sky had cleared and the sun was just about visible when Boryna emerged from his cottage. Hanka and Józka had gone ahead at dawn already with the sow and fattened hog, and Antek had driven off with ten sacks of wheat and a bushel of red clover seed. Only Kuba and Witek were left at home with Jagustynka, who had been summoned to prepare food and see to the cows.

Witek was wailing loudly, as he longed to go to the fair.

'That fool and his whims,' muttered Boryna as he crossed himself and set off on foot, counting on getting a lift along the road; and so he did, for right after the inn, the organist caught up with him, riding in a britchka drawn by a pair of stout horses.

'What's this, Maciej, on foot?'

'Good health ... praised be.'

'For ever, amen. Get up with me, there's room!' the organist's wife proposed.

'God bless. I'm content to walk, but as they say, 'tis pleasing to the heart to ride in a cart,' he replied, climbing on to the front seat, with his back to the horses.

They shook hands cordially and the horses moved off.

'And where has young Jan sprung from – no classes, then?' he asked the boy, who was driving, with the farmhand beside him.

'I came home just for the fair,' the organist's boy called merrily.

'Take some, it's French,' the organist offered, flicking open his snuffbox.

They helped themselves and sneezed solemnly.

'What's your news? Selling anything?'

'Ah no, they took the wheat earlier, and the women drove the pigs.'

'Not bad!' exclaimed the organist's wife. 'Jan, take your scarf. It's cold!' she called to her son.

'I'm warm, perfectly warm,' he assured her, but she wound a red scarf around his neck all the same.

'And my outgoings? I can scarce cover it all ...'

'Don't complain, Maciej. You've enough, thank God ...' said the organist's wife.

'I cannot chew the land. As for ready cash, there's none to spare.'

'Because you lend ... do you not have plenty coming in from folk? No door's closed to a neighbour's nose!'

But Boryna, displeased by these comments in front of a farmhand, leaned over quickly and quietly asked:

'And will Jan be at school for long?'

'Until the holidays only.'

'And will he come home or become an official?'

'My good man, what would he do on fifteen morgen? Have we not children enough at home still! Times are hard as stone,' she said with a sigh.

'True, there are plenty of christenings, but what profit is there from that!' said the organist.

'No lack of funerals either,' Boryna put in ironically.

'Eh ... what sort of funerals are they, only poor wretches dying, and a farmer's funeral that might bring in a grosz or two but twice a year.'

'And fewer votive Masses all the time, and then they haggle like Jews!' added the organist's wife.

'It is all down to poverty and these evil times,' Boryna explained.

'And also because people these days don't care about their own salvation or of those left in purgatory. The good father has often spoken to my husband about it.'

'And there are fewer manors now,' said the organist. 'Before, when you'd do the rounds at harvest or hand out the Christmas wafers, or at Yuletide, or taking the parish census,⁷ you'd make a beeline for the manor – they'd not stint on grain, or money, or fare. And now, Lord have mercy, every farmer has grown so stingy. If he hands over a bundle of wheat, it's probably the bit the mice have chewed, and if you get a half-bushel of oats there's bound to be more chaff than grain. My wife can tell you what sort of eggs they gave me this year past for the Easter census – more than half were bad! If it weren't for the bit of land we have, I'd be after alms like an old beggar,' he finished, pushing the snuffbox towards Boryna.

'Aye, aye ...' Boryna nodded agreement, but he was no fool; he knew full well that the organist had money and lent it to the hired hands at interest or for payment in kind, so he only smiled at these complaints and asked once more about Jan.

'So, he's all set to be an official, is he?'

'What? My Jaś a government clerk? I didn't starve myself so he'd finish school for that, oh no. He'll be off to the seminary for a priest ...'

'A priest!'

'Why not, won't he be well off? How hard a life does a priest have?'

'For sure, for sure, and an honour it is too, and as they say: none will do badly with a priest in the family,' Boryna said carefully and glanced with respect over his shoulder at the boy whistling to the horses, who'd slowed down to do their business ...

'They say the miller's Stach was to go for a priest, but now it seems he's at the high school and in training for a doctor.'

'Ha, that rogue a priest! Why, my Magda's in her sixth month and by him ...'

'They say it was the miller's man.'

'Ha, that's what the miller's wife says to shield him. The hand of God protect us from such a lecher, just right for a doctor.'

'Aye, better a priest – it gives glory to God, and comforts the people,' Boryna soothed her slyly – for why bother squabbling with a woman – and listened attentively to her reasoning, while the organist raised his cap from time to time to greet passers-by, exclaiming loudly: 'For ever, amen!' They were trotting along, Jasio energetically overtaking carts here, people and livestock there, until they reached the forest, where it was less crowded and the road wider.

At its very edge they caught up with Dominik's widow, riding with Jagna and Szymek. Their cow walked behind, tied by its horns to the cart, from which stretched the white necks of geese, hissing ceaselessly like snakes.

They praised God, and Boryna leaned right out on passing them and called:

'You'll be late!'

'We'll get there on time!' Jagna shouted back, laughing.

They drove on, but the organist's lad turned round to look at her a few more times and finally asked:

'Is that Jagusia Dominikowa?'

'That's her, aye,' said Boryna, watching her recede into the distance.

'I didn't recognize her. It's been two years since I saw her.'

'She's still a lass, and she were herding the cows then. She's filled out, like a heifer in the clover,' and he all but leaned out to take another look at her.

'Very pretty,' the boy threw in.

'Like all the wenches,' said the organist's wife scornfully.

'She's very easy on the eye. Turned out well, the lass – there's not a week goes by when someone isn't sending round the vodka,' said Boryna.

'And choosy! The old woman thinks there'll be some bailiff at the very least turning up for her, and chases the lads away,' she murmured bitingly.

'And why not one with even thirty morgen? She's worth it.'

'Well, you might as well send the matchmakers yourself, Maciej, since you praise her so!' She began to laugh, and Boryna did not say another word.

'Ha, you miserable stuck-up town baggage, forever checking under the tail of every farmer's chicken to see if it'll lay for you, or poking in folk's pockets – she'll be mocking born farmers!'

Hands off Jagna!' he thought to himself, mightily angered, and stared ahead, at the blaze of red aprons in Dominikowa's cart, fast disappearing into the distance, for Jaś was whipping the horses to such a gallop that the mud flew.

In vain did the organist's wife chat of this and that. Boryna only nodded, muttered something under his breath and doggedly refused to say another word.

As soon as they arrived on the town's bumpy cobbles, he got down from the britchka and thanked them for the ride.

'We're returning early evening – join us if you like,' she suggested.

'Bless you, I've my own horses. They'll be saying the organist's taking me on to pump the bellows ... and me not able to sing a note nor learn when to put the candles out ...'

They turned down a side street, while he slowly pushed his way through along the main road to the marketplace, for it was a large fair and though it was still early, quite a crowd had gathered. Streets, squares, alleys and courtyards were swamped with people, carts and all manner of goods – a great sea it was into which human rivers flowed ceaselessly from every side, squeezing in, swaying, rolling down the narrow little streets until the houses began to shake, before pouring out on to the great monastery church square. There'd been little mud along the road, but here, churned and trodden by a thousand feet, it was ankle deep and spattered in all directions by the cartwheels.

There was quite a din already and it grew louder all the time, a dull uproar that boomed like a forest grove, breaking like the sea; it beat against the walls of houses and rolled back and forth, so that the lowing of cows was heard only in snatches, or a barrel organ playing by the carousel, or the plaintive laments of beggars, or the sharp piercing whistle of the basketmakers' reed pipes.

Truly it was a huge fair: so many folk had gathered that it was a struggle to get through, and so crowded between the stalls by the monastery square that Boryna had to force his way forward.

So much of everything, you could neither count nor comprehend it – for where to begin?

First were the tall canvas booths that stood alongside the church in two rows, brimming with women's wares: fabrics aplenty, and shawls hanging from poles, some red as red poppies – it fair made your eyes smart – while others were purest yellow, and others crimson as beetroot ... but who could remember them all! Women and lasses were swarming so thickly you couldn't thrust a stick between them – some would haggle and choose while others only gazed and feasted their eyes on all the delights.

And then came stalls that fairly glittered with necklaces, looking glasses and sparkling tinselled threads, ribbons and ruffled collars, and little flowers, green, golden and every colour besides ... and caps and goodness knows what else.

Elsewhere they were selling holy images, glazed and in gilded frames, which though ranged against the walls or even on the ground, still shone so brightly that folk would reach for their caps and make the sign of the holy cross.

Boryna bought a silken headscarf for Józka that he had promised the girl back before spring to reward her for grazing the cows; he thrust it in his bosom and began pushing his way to the pig market behind the monastery. But since the throng was so dense and there was plenty to see, he took his time.

There were hatters with wide ladders placed against houses, hung from top to bottom with caps.

There were tailors who'd formed a whole street of tall wooden trestles from which rows of shoes dangled, fastened by their straps, both the ordinary yellow kind that had to be greased with melted fat to stop the water getting in and ones already prepared and polished, as well as women's pointed shoes with red laces and high heels.

And behind them rows of saddlers with horse collars and harnesses hanging from pegs.

And next came ropemakers and those who sold nets.

And those who travelled the land selling sieves.

And those who did the rounds of the fairs selling groats.

And wheelwrights and tanners.

Elsewhere again, tailors and furriers set out their wares, which gave off such a smell it fair tickled the nostrils; these last were doing good business, as winter was coming.

And then came whole rows of tables under linen canopies on poles, with rings of red sausage and others thick as rope, slabs of yellow fat, smoked pork belly, sides of bacon, hams piled up in heaps, or whole gutted hogs hanging from hooks and still flowing with blood, so that the dogs swarmed beneath and had to be chased away.

And close by the butchers, as though brothers born, stood the bakers where, on thickly strewn straw, on carts, on tables, in baskets and in every possible space, were stacked mountains of loaves, big as wheels, yellow cakes, buns and sweet glazed rolls ...

Who could count or remember all those stalls and all they had for sale?

There were stalls with toys, and stalls with gingerbread of every shape: animals and hearts and soldiers and oddities you could hardly fathom; there were stalls with calendars, with prayer books, tales of banditry and stern Magielona,⁸ and primers too; stalls with pipes, mouth organs, clay whistles in the shape of birds, and every kind of musical instrument, which those Jewish rascals were playing as enticement, making such a clamour it was hard to bear, for here a singing bird was squeaking, there a trumpet trumpeted, pipes drawled long-drawn-out notes, or fiddles screeched alongside the groaning belch of drums, until your head was splitting with the racket.

In the middle of the market, around the trees, sprawled coopers, tinsmiths and potters, who had spread out so many bowls and pans you could hardly pass, and behind them the carpenters, with beds and painted chests, cupboards and shelves and tables so colourful they made you blink ...

And everywhere, on the carts, against the walls, along the gutters, wherever there was space, women had settled themselves with their wares: one had onions on strings or in sacks; another had her own handmade linens and lengths of woollen fabric and another had brought eggs and cheeses, mushrooms and rounds of butter wrapped in cloth; yet another had potatoes, a couple of little geese or a plucked chicken, or fine-combed flax or spools of yarn. Each sat beside her own goods and they chatted together amiably, in the usual way of fairs, and if a buyer should appear, they did business slowly, serenely, without a fuss, in the country way, not like the Jews, who cry out and quarrel and fling themselves about like fools.

Meanwhile, here and there among the carts and stalls, tin stoves were smoking – hot tea was for sale and other food: roast sausage, cabbage, or borscht with potatoes too.

And no end of beggars had descended from all directions: the blind, the lame, the mute, those without arms or legs, as many as on a feast day. They played hymns on fiddles, or sang, tapping their bowls, and all of them, from under carts, against walls or even sitting in the mud, were timidly begging for alms and pleading for some small coin or other assistance.

Boryna had a good look and marvelled over many things, exchanged a word with acquaintances and pushed his way at last to the pig market, behind the monastery, on a great sandy square, with only a few buildings dotted here and there, where quite a few people and carts and whole rows of pigs brought for sale had gathered right under the monastery wall, over which huge oaks leaned, still bearing plentiful yellow leaves.

He quickly found Hanka and Józka, as they were right at the edge.

'Sold anything?'

'Ha, the butchers have been haggling for the sow, but they don't offer much.'

'Are the pigs dear?'

'Not a bit – that many have been brought, who's going to buy 'em all?'

'Anyone from Lipce?'

‘The Kłabs have got their piglets over there, and Dominik’s Szymek is here with a hog.’

‘Wind it up quick, then you’ll see a bit o’ the fair.’

‘We’re sick o’ sitting here.’

‘How much for the sow?’

‘Thirty notes. They say she’s underfed – seems it’s not fat but her bones that are thick.’

‘Lying Gypsies ... why, she’s four fingers of fat at least,’ he said, groping the sow’s back and flanks. ‘The hog’s lean on the flanks, but his hind’s not bad for ham,’ he added, chasing the pig out of the wet sand where he lay plunged up to his sides.

‘Sell him for thirty-five. I’ll look in on Antek and be right back. Aren’t you hungry?’

‘We had a bit o’ bread.’

‘I’ll buy you some sausage – just get the pig sold, and well.’

‘*Tatulu*, don’t you forget the kerchief you promised back before spring ...’

Boryna reached to his breast, but stopped himself, as though something had struck him, for, moving off, he only waved his hand saying, ‘I’ll buy you one, Józia, I’ll buy one ...’ and he all but galloped off, for he’d spied Jagna’s face between the carts, but by the time he got there, she’d completely vanished, as though the ground had swallowed her up, so instead he searched out Antek. It was no easy task, for cart bumped against cart in the little street leading from the market to the square, and two rows deep besides, so that driving down the middle was considerably difficult and demanding of attention, but he soon found him. Antek was sitting on a pile of sacks, swishing his crop at some Jewish chickens that flocked around the punnets from which the horses were feeding, and muttering testily to the merchants:

‘Seven I said, so it’s seven.’

‘Six and a half I’ll give. I can do no more – the wheat’s got blight.’

‘Oi, you scab, you’ll get one across your rotten mug, then you’ll soon be feeling blight ... Hark, that wheat’s pure as gold.’

‘Maybe, but it’s damp ... I’ll give six roubles and five zlotys by measure.’

‘You’ll buy it by weight for seven, I said!’

‘Why get cross, friend! A man can haggle, whether he buys or not.’

‘Haggle away, since you don’t value your mug.’ And he ignored the Jews who were now untying the sacks and checking the wheat.

‘Antek, I’ll step to the notary’s and be back in the wink of an eye ...’

‘What? Are you lodging a complaint against the manor?’

‘And whose fault was it my skewbald dropped dead?’

‘Precious little you’ll gain.’

‘I’ll not let an injury pass.’

‘Eh ... pin the woodsman to a fir in the forest and give him a beating with something hard enough to make his ribs squeak ... there’s your justice.’

‘The woodsman? Aye, he deserves it, but the manor too,’ he said firmly.

‘Give us a zloty.’

‘What for?’

‘I’d like a vodka and a bite ...’

‘Have you not money of your own? Always peering in your father’s fist.’

Antek turned away abruptly and began whistling in anger, and the old man, though morose and reluctant, coughed up a zloty and handed it over.

‘They’d suck your blood dry,’ he thought as he hurriedly pushed his way to a huge corner inn where a sizeable crowd was eating; the notary lived in a recess off the courtyard. He happened to be sitting at a table by the window in just his shirtsleeves with a cigar between his teeth, unwashed and tousle-haired; some woman was sleeping on a pallet in the corner, covered with a coat.

‘Sit down, my good man!’ The notary threw aside some muddled clothing and pulled up a stool for Boryna, who quickly explained the whole matter in detail.

‘Your win, sure as a prayer ends in amen. Come on! A dead cow and a boy sick with terror! It’s our gain!’ he rubbed his hands together and hunted for paper.

‘Eh, but the boy’s well.’

‘No matter, he could have got sick. He was beaten after all ...’

‘No, that was the neighbour’s boy.’

‘Pity, would’ve been better. But we’ll cobble it together somehow to make a sickness from a beating, and a dead cow. Let the manor pay.’

‘Aye, it’s foremost a matter of justice.’

‘I’ll soon have a complaint drawn up. Frania, shift yourself, you idler!’ he shouted and gave the woman lying there such a kick she raised her dishevelled head. ‘Fetch some vodka and something to eat ...’

‘I’ve not got a grosz, and you know they won’t give me credit, Gucio,’ she muttered, and clambering out the mess of bedding took to stretching and yawning. She was big as a stove, with a huge swollen, bruised and drunken face, and a high-pitched voice, like a child’s.

The notary scratched away with his pen, dragging on his cigar and blowing the smoke into Boryna’s face as the latter watched him writing. He rubbed his skinny freckled hands now and then and turned his pinched and pimply face to Franka; his front teeth were broken, his lips were blue and he had great black whiskers.

He drew up the complaint, took a rouble for it, another for the stamp and settled on three more for appearing at court when the case came to the table.

Boryna agreed to everything readily, though he begrudged the money, for he reckoned the manor would pay for everything and with damages besides.

‘There must be justice in the world – it’s a done deed!’ he said on leaving.

‘If we don’t win at the commune court, we’ll go to the assembly; if the assembly cannot help, we’ll go to the *powia*⁹ court, to the chamber of justice – we’ll not give in.’

‘Why should I forgo what’s mine!’ Boryna cried, adamant. ‘And not to the manor, for sure, with all its woods and land!’ he thought, coming on to the square, when suddenly, by the hatters, he ran into Jagna.

She was standing with a navy cap on her head and haggling over another.

‘Just look, Maciej, this yella is saying it’s fine, but he’s surely lying ...’

‘It’s grand. For Jędrzych, is it?’

‘Aye, I’ve bought one for Szymek already.’

‘Won’t it be too small?’

‘His head’s tiny as mine ...’

‘You’d make a lovely little farmhand ...’

‘Wouldn’t I!’ she called cheekily, tilting the cap a little.

‘You’d soon get hired here.’

‘Ha ... I’m too dear for service.’ She began to laugh.

‘Depends for whom, you wouldn’t be too dear for me ...’

‘You’d not see me out in the fields.’

‘I’d do the work for you, Jagna, I would that ...’ he whispered more quietly and looked at her with such passion that the girl drew back in confusion and paid for the cap without haggling.

‘Have you sold your cow?’ he asked a moment later, having come to his senses a little and clipped the pleasure that had made his head spin as vodka did.

‘It were bought for the priest in Jerzowo. Mother’s gone with the organist – they want to hire a farmhand.’

‘Well, let’s step in for a glass of something sweet!’

‘How do you mean?’

‘You’ve got chilly, Jagna, you can warm up a little ...’

‘I can’t be going for vodka with you!’

‘I’ll bring some over and we’ll drink here, Jaguś.’

‘God bless your kindness, but I have to find my mother.’

‘I’ll help you, Jagna,’ he whispered in a low voice and went ahead, working his elbows so that Jagna could walk freely behind him through the crowd, but when they passed the fabric stalls, the girl slowed and paused, her eyes fair blazing at the sight of all the stuffs laid out.

‘What gorgeousness, dear Jesus!’ she whispered, stopping before the ribbons dangling high and fluttering in the wind like a fiery rainbow.

‘Choose any that takes your fancy, Jagna,’ he said after a moment’s thought, overcoming his niggardliness.

‘Ha, that yellow one with flowers costs a rouble or even ten zlotys!’

‘Never you mind, take it ...’

But with an effort and regret she tore her hands away and went on to the next stall, while Boryna paused a moment.

But there were more scarves at the next stall and stuff for bodices and tunics.

'Jesus, such beauties, Jesus!' she whispered, enchanted, sinking her trembling hands again and again into green satins and red velvets, until her eyes were smarting and her heart fluttered with delight. And the headkerchiefs! Crimson silk with green flowers at the hem; all golden like a holy monstrance; or deep blue like the sky after rain; and white ones; or, most beautiful of all, the iridescent ones, which shimmered like water in the setting sun and were light as gossamer! No, she couldn't bear it and began to try them on and examine herself in the mirror held by a Jewish woman.

She looked lovely, as though she'd wound the rays of dawn around her flaxen hair; and her blue eyes shone with such joy they cast a violet glow over her blushing face. She smiled at herself, until people turned to look, so lovely was she and such youth and health radiated from her.

'Is it some lady in disguise, or what?' they whispered.

She spent a long time looking at herself, and with a heavy sigh took off the scarf, but began to haggle, just for the sake of it, for she hadn't the money, and to feast her eyes a little longer. She soon cooled when the seller said five roubles, and even Boryna began quickly to lead her away.

They stopped again by the beads – of which there were not a few, as though someone had sprinkled the whole stall with little costly stones that shone and glittered so that it was hard to tear the eyes away. There was yellow amber, as though made of fragrant resin; coral like drops of blood, and white pearls as big as hazelnuts, and others still of silver and gold ...

Jagna tried on several and picked over more, and then she spied the most beautiful string of all; she wound it round her neck four times and turned to the old man.

'Well, what d'you think?'

'Lovely, Jagna! But beads are no marvel to me, there are eight strings at least from my late wife, lying in a chest, and big as field peas!' he said casually, with intent.

'What's that to me when they're not mine!' She tossed down the beads and walked briskly now, frowning and sad.

'Let's sit down a moment, Jagna.'

'It's time I found Mother.'

'She'll not leave without you, don't worry.'

They sat down on a cart shaft.

'A fine fair,' Boryna said after a moment, looking about the square.

'Not small, for sure!' She was still glancing regretfully towards the stalls and sighing to herself, but her dejection was lifting quickly and she said:

'It's all very well for the manor folk. I saw the lady from Wola with the young misses. They bought themselves so much the footman had to carry it! And they do that every fair!'

'He'll not last long who plays the fair too often.'

'They'll last plenty long.'

'While the Jews are still lending,'¹⁰ he threw in scathingly, so that Jagna turned and stared and didn't know what to say, and the old man, not looking at her, probed quietly:

'So Wójtek's Michał has been round to yours with the vodka, Jaguś, eh?'

'Been and gone! That dolt. Sending matchmakers round, indeed,' she said with a laugh.

Boryna rose quickly, pulled out the scarf and something else wrapped in paper.

'Hold this, Jagna, I have to look in on Antek.'

'Is he at the fair?' Her eyes brightened.

'He's back down the street, with the wheat. Take it, Jagna, it's for you,' he added, seeing Jagna run astonished eyes over the scarf.

'You're giving it to me? Really? Jesus, what a beauty!' she exclaimed unwinding the very ribbon to which she'd taken such a fancy. 'Ha, you're pulling my leg – why for me? So dear ... and the scarf, pure silk.'

'Take it, Jagna, take it, I bought it for you, and if some fellow drinks to you, don't you drink back, no hurry for that ... time for me to go.'

'It's really for me?'

'Why would I jest!'

'I can't believe it.' First she turned the scarf over, then the ribbon again.

'Goodbye, Jagna.'

'God bless, Maciej.'

Boryna left, and Jagna again turned to unfolding and looking, and suddenly wrapped everything up together and wanted to run after him and give them back ... for to accept such from a stranger, not even cousin or kin – but the old man had gone.

She trailed along slowly, looking for her mother, and carefully fingering the scarf with pleasure, she thrust it in her bosom. She was so pleased that her white teeth shone in a smile and her face was flushed.

'Jagusia! Help – a poor lonely soul ... dear people ... Christians true ... A Hail Mary for your dear departed ... Jagusia!'

Jagna's head cleared and she began to glance about to see who was calling and where, when she suddenly spied Agata sitting beside the monastery wall on a clump of straw, as the mud was ankle deep in that spot. She stopped to hunt for a coin, and Agata, overjoyed to see a familiar face, began pressing her for news of Lipce.

'Digging's done already?'

'Every last potato!'

'What's up at the Kłąbs?'

'They turn you out to beg and you're asking after 'em?'

'Turned out! There were no turning out, I went myself, it were needed ... What, were they to give me food or a corner for free, when they're hardly flush themselves ... They're kin, so I'm asking ...'

'And what's your news?'

'Well, I go from church to church, village to village, fair to fair, and I pray and ask good people if there's a corner where a morsel's cooking, a grosz or two! People are good, they won't let a poor wretch die of hunger, no ... Do you know, are they all well at the Kłąbs?' she asked timidly.

'They are, and you, are you ailing?'

'Eh ... nay, my chest is always aching, and when I get a chill, then I spit pure blood ... not long for me, not long ... I must pull through to spring, return to the village and die among my own – that's all I beg of the good Jesus.' She spread her hands wound about with a rosary, lifted her tear-stained face and began to pray so fervently that tears trickled from her reddened eyes.

'Say a prayer for my *tanula*,' whispered Jagna, handing her a coin.

'This'll be for them that's left in purgatory, since I pray for my own all the time anyway and I beg God's favour for the living and the dead, Jaguś, and haven't they been round with the vodka?'

'They have.'

'None took your fancy.'

'Not one. God be with you, and look in on us in the spring,' she said quickly and went to her mother whom she'd spied from a distance with the organist and his wife.

Boryna meanwhile made his way to Antek slowly, first because there was a crowd and second because Jagna was on his mind, but before he got there he bumped into the blacksmith.

They greeted each other and walked along together in silence.

'You'll settle with me then, eh?' the blacksmith began sharply.

'Settle what? You could have raised the matter in Lipce.' He was cross now.

'It's four year I've been waiting.'

'Remembered today, have you! You can wait another forty then, till I die.'

'People are advising I go to court ... but ...'

'Do that. I'll tell you where it is, and give you a rouble for the notary ...'

'But I'm thinking we can come to a friendly agreement ...' he hedged slyly.

'True, if a man's not at war, then it's peace.'

'You've put it well.'

'I need neither peace nor war with you.'

'I'm always telling the wife that Father is for justice.'

'Everyone's for justice when they need it on their side – I do not, since I owe you nothing,' he said so firmly that seeing nothing to be broached this way, the blacksmith retreated and coolly asked, all calmness and politeness:

'I could do with a drink. Will you stand me one?'

'I will. Why, a whole quart for such a fine son-in-law,' he mocked a little, entering the corner inn; Ambrozy was there already, not drinking, but sitting in a corner, somewhat sad and morose.

'My bones are drubbing, foul weather's coming,' he declared.

Boryna and the blacksmith had a drink and another, but in silence, for each had spleen to vent at the other.

'You're drinking like it's a funeral!' Ambrozy piped up, cross they'd not invited him, for he hadn't had a bite or a drop since morning.

'What's there to say? Father's selling so much today, he's having to think who to lend to at interest ...'

'Maciej! I tell you, Maciej, that the Lord Jesus ...' persisted Ambrozy.

'I'm not Maciej to you! Hark at him, bold as brass. A swine keen to be kin to the herdsman,' he said, mightily angered.

And the blacksmith, with two strong drinks down him now, gained confidence and said quietly:

'Father, tell me straight: will you settle with me or not?'

'I've said I'll not take it to the grave. Till then not a morgen will I give up. I'll not be pensioned to you; I've a good year or two left in the world yet.'

'Pay me off, then.'

'Did you not hear?'

'On the lookout for a third wife, so what do the children matter,' Ambrozy whispered.

'Very likely, aye.'

'If I want, I'll wed. Forbid it, will you?'

'Not I, but ...'

'I'll send the vodka round tomorrow, if I feel like it.'

'Send it – am I against you! Just give me at least that young bull you've got from the skewbald, and I'll help you myself. You've sense enough to reckon what suits you best. Many a time I've spelled out to the wife that you need a woman so the farm don't go to rack and ruin.'

'You've said that, Michal?'

'May I meet Judgement Day without confession if I haven't! Why the whole village takes advice from me if need be – would I not know what's good for you!'

'You're lying through your teeth, you villain, but come by tomorrow, you'll get the bullock; since you ask, I'll give it. But if it's lawsuits you're after – then you'll end up with this broken stick, or worse ...'

They had another drink; the blacksmith stood them this time and summoned Ambrozy to the company too. He joined them willingly and began telling funny tales and joking so that they burst out laughing again and again.

They were not merry together for long, however, since each was eager to get back to his own folk and business. They parted cordially, but neither trusted the other an inch; they knew each other like the back of their hand and could see through each other as through a pane of glass.

Only Ambrozy was left, waiting for an acquaintance or a crony to stand him at least a pint, for even a fly's good enough for a dog till someone throws him a bone, and he was certainly fond of a drink, though it was hard to buy his own, and no surprise, since he was only a verger.

The fair was drawing to a close.

The sun came out at noon, but did no more than flash like a looking glass before quickly hiding behind the clouds. By evening the world had grown dejected: heavy clouds drifted low, almost lying on the rooftops, and a light rain began to drizzle as though through a fine sieve. Everyone dispersed more quickly, hurrying to get home before dark and the onset of a downpour.

The merchants, too, took down their stalls more quickly and packed them on to carts, as a dense cold rain began to lash down.

Dusk descended quickly, heavy and wet.

The town grew empty and silent.

Only the beggars moaned here and there beside the walls, and from the inns came the shouts of drunken quarrels.

It was evening when the Borynas left town; they had sold all they'd brought, bought all manner of things and thoroughly enjoyed the fair. Antek whipped on the horses and drove until the mud flew, for it felt like frost was on the way and everyone had had a drink or two; the old man, though he was miserly and fair squealed after money, had treated them all so freely to food and drink and a kind word today that it was odd indeed.

Night had fallen by the time they reached the forest.

It was dark as pitch; the rain worsened, the rumble of carts could be heard occasionally on the road, or hoarse drunken singing and someone splashing slowly through the mud.

Down the middle of the poplar road, where the wind murmured low and moaned as though with cold, came Ambrozy, completely drunk, staggering from side to side, sometimes bumping into a tree or stumbling in the mud, but rising quickly and all the while singing at the top of his voice, as was his custom. So foul was the weather and so dark that you could not see the horses' tails, and the village lights were barely to be glimpsed, like the blinking of wolves' eyes.

CHAPTER 6

The rains had well and truly set in.

Since the fair, everything had been sinking slowly into a blurry glaze of grey rain, so that only the pale outline of woods and villages emerged, as though woven from softened yarn.

The endless cold and piercing squalls of autumn had begun.

Grizzled icy rods of rain shredded the earth persistently until, sodden to the core, every tree, every stem trembled with infinite pain.

Scraps of blackened earth, drenched and flattened, peeped momentarily through the greenish bluster and from under the heavy clouds that swirled above the ground. Spurts of foaming water flashed as they flowed along the ditches, while solitary trees loomed black against the baulks – bent over, swollen with damp, shaking off their last leafy rags and struggling in despair like tethered dogs.

The empty roads slopped with muddy, fetid puddles. The short, sad, sunless days trailed festering smears of light, and the dark, dull forlorn nights subsided into endless monotonous lapping ...

An ominous silence enveloped the earth.

The trees fell silent, the villages were hushed, the forest mute.

The village darkened and seemed to cleave more firmly to the earth, the fences and the bare, twisted, quietly groaning orchards.

A grey pall of rain shrouded the whole world and drank the colours dry, smothering the light and submerging the earth in shadow, so that everything seemed like the delirium of a dream, and sadness rose from the stagnant fields, from the torpid forest, from the lifeless wastes, and slouched heavily in a thick cloud. It paused at the dismal crossroads, under crosses stretching out their desperate arms, on empty roads where naked trees trembled with cold and sobbed in torment. It looked into abandoned nests with empty eyes, into tumbledown cottages; in dead cemeteries it wandered among forgotten graves and decaying crosses. And on it flowed through the whole world – through bare, stripped, desecrated fields, through godforsaken villages, peering into huts and byres and orchards, until the cattle lowed in alarm, trees bent down with stifled moans and people sighed woefully in terrible, inconsolable longing for the sun.

The rain drizzled constantly, coating the world in a thin glaze, and all Lipce was submerged in dense raw weather, from which black thatch and drenched stone walls emerged now and then, and dirty tangles of smoke wound above chimneys and drifted through orchards.

It was quiet in the village; the sound of threshing could be heard occasionally from a barn, but only rarely, since everyone was out in the cabbage fields.

The sodden muddy roads were deserted, and farmyards and porches stood empty. Someone would loom briefly through the mist, but quickly disappear, so that only the plodding of clogs in the mud could be heard or a cart laden with cabbages trundling slowly from the peat bogs, scattering the geese paddling after any stray leaves that might fall on to the road.

The pond, swelling constantly, strained at its confining banks until it overflowed on to the lower parts of the road along Boryna's side, reaching the fences and spattering foam against the cottage walls.

The whole village was busy cutting and gathering cabbages. Threshing floors, hallways and rooms were full of them, so that in places their blue-tinged heads reached to the very eaves.

Great barrels were soaking, set out in the rain in front of the cottages.

All were in great haste, for the rain had barely paused and the road was becoming an almost impassable quagmire.

At Dominikowa's too they were cutting cabbages today.

Jagna and Szymek had left for the cabbage field early, while Jędrzych had stayed behind to patch the roof, which leaked in several places.

It was almost evening and since it was beginning to darken, the old woman kept going out to look into the mist, towards the mill, and to listen – wasn't that them coming?

But on the low-lying cabbage fields on the peat bogs beyond the mill, the work was still forging ahead.

A damp blackish mist lay over the meadows through which wide ditches full of grey water glimmered fitfully and the raised rows of cabbages glowed a pale blue-green, or like strips of rusty tin. Here and there, the women's red woollen skirts could be glimpsed through the mist alongside heaps of cut cabbage heads.

In the hazy distance, beside the river flowing noisily through undergrowth dense and livid as a cloud, stood blackened mounds of peat and the carts to which workers carried the cabbages bound in sheets, for they couldn't drive any closer over such boggy ground.

Some folk were finishing and heading for home, and voices were ringing out more loudly, echoing from strip to strip.

Jagna had only just finished hers. She was mightily tired, hungry and soaked to the skin. Even her clogs sank to her ankles in the ruddy, peaty soil, so that she had to keep sliding them off to tip out the water.

'Get a move on, Szymek! I can't feel my pegs!' she called piteously, and seeing that the boy could not manage, she snatched the great bundle impatiently from him, threw it over her shoulder and carried it to the cart.

'Great lad you are, and soft in the back as a new-birthing woman,' she muttered with disdain, tipping the cabbages into a cart strewn with straw.

Embarrassed, Szymek mumbled under his breath and scratched his tousled head as he harnessed the horse.

'Hurry up, Szymek – it's dark!' she harried him, loading more cabbage on to the cart.

Night was falling and the gloom deepened and darkened while the rain intensified, splashing on the soft earth and ditches like someone scattering seed.

'Józia! Will you be done today?' she called to the Boryna girl, who was cutting with Hanka and Kuba nearby.

'We will! Time to get back – such foul weather my smock's wet through. Are you off?'

'Aye. Night any minute and that dark you can't make out the road. We'll bring in the rest tomorrow. Fine cabbages you've got!' she added, leaning over and looking at the heaps looming in the mist.

'Yours ain't bad, and as for the neeps, yours are the biggest ...'

'From the new seed the reverend brought from Warsaw.'

'Jagna,' Józia's voice came out of the mist again, 'did you know that tomorrow the Józefs' Walek is sending round the vodka to Marysia Pociotek ...'

'That little squirt! Is she that old? Seems like just last year she were minding the cows!'

'Old enough for a lad, and with that many morgen, they're falling over each other.'

'They'll be rushing round for you, too, Józia, never fear ...'

'If Dad don't take a third wife!' shouted Jagustynka, somewhere from the third strip.

'Give over, they only just buried their mother in spring,' said Hanka, in a tone of alarm.

'What does that bother a man? Every one of 'em's like that hog: no matter how drunk, he'll rush to stick his snout in a new trough ... Ho, ho, one's still slipping away, still warm ... and he's looking about for another ... dogs, the lot of 'em ... What about Sikora? Three weeks after the first one's buried, he marries another.'

'True, but she left five little 'uns behind ...' said Hanka.

'Indeed! But you'd have to be stupid to think he married for the kids ... for himself, more like; it were glum under the quilt alone!'

'We'd never let Father, oh no!' Józia cried out energetically.

'Young you are, and stupid yet ... the land's your father's, what he says goes!'

'Children mean something and have their rights too,' Hanka began.

'Better land on your feet in a puddle than crowd another's cart,' Jagustynka muttered under her breath and fell silent because Józka, cross now, had begun calling Witek, who was loitering somewhere by the river. Jagna had taken no part in the talk – but only smiled now and then, remembering the fair, and carried on with the cabbages. Since the cart was full, Szymek set off towards the road.

'God go with you,' she called to her neighbours.

'Go with God, we're off too ... Jaguś, will you come to trim 'em at ours?'¹

'Tell me when, and I'll come, Józia, I will ...'

'And the boys are sorting music for the Kłabs on Sunday, did you know?'

'I know, Józia, I know.'

'If you meet Antek, tell him to hurry, we're waiting,' said Hanka.

'All right, all right ...'

She ran to catch up with the cart, for Szymek was a furlong away already, so that all she could hear was him swearing at the horse. The cart floundered and sank to the axles in the soft peaty ground, and in the dips and boggiest places they had to help the horse drag free of the mire together.

Neither of them spoke; Szymek led the horse, taking care to steady the cart, for there were ruts everywhere, and Jagna went along the other side, leaning her shoulder against the cart and pondering what to wear for the cabbage paring at the Boryna house.

The darkness descended swiftly so that the horse was scarcely visible. The rain seemed to ease, but the fog hung damp and heavy, making it hard to breathe, and the wind souged above, pummelling the trees on the dyke, which they were just approaching.

It was a hard drive up the levee, steep and slippery; the horse faltered and paused at every step and they could barely stop the cart from running away.

'Shouldn't have loaded that much on a single horse!' a voice rang from the dyke.

'Is that you, Antoni?'

'Aye.'

'Hurry up – Hanka's looking for you ... Give us a hand ...'

'Hang on, let me just get down. Can't see a thing, it's that dark.'

They soon got up the dyke, for he shoved so hard the horse broke into a trot and did not pause until it reached the top.

'God bless – heavens, but you're strong!' She stretched out her hand to him.

They fell silent suddenly, the cart lurched forward and they walked side by side, not knowing what to say, both oddly confused.

'You heading back?' she whispered quietly.

'I'll just walk you as far as the mill, Jagna – the water's breached there.'

'It's proper dark, isn't it?' she cried.

'Are you scared, Jagna?' he whispered, moving closer ...

'Me? As if I'd be scared ...'

Again they were silent, and walked side by side, hip to hip, shoulder to shoulder ...

'Your eyes are shining like a wolf's ... but truly ...'

'Are you coming to the Kłqbs' for the music on Sunday?'

'If my mother even lets me ...'

'Come, Jagna, come ...' he begged in a quiet choked voice.

'D'you want me to?' she asked gently, looking into his eyes.

'Lord, when it's for you I got the fiddler to come from Wola and for you I persuaded Kłq to let us use his place, for you, Jagna,' he whispered, moving his face so close to hers and breathing so heavily that she drew back and trembled with agitation.

'Go ... they're waiting for you ... someone'll see us ... go ...'

'Will you come?'

'I'll come ... I'll come ...' she repeated, looking back at him, but he had disappeared into the mist and only the sound of his steps in the mud could be heard.

She was seized with a violent shivering and a kind of flame seemed to tear like a gale through her heart and head so that she almost reeled. She barely knew what had struck her. Her eyes burned like glowing embers; she could not catch her breath or still the violent beating of her heart. She stretched out her arms instinctively as though to embrace something, then tensed her body, seized by such wild cravings that she almost cried out ... Catching up with the cart, she grasped the shaft and needlessly began shoving so hard that the cart creaked and swayed and cabbage heads tumbled into the mud ... All the while his face stood before her and his eyes sparkled, avid ... burning ...

'Beast of a man ... can't be another like him anywhere,' Jagna thought in confusion.

She was roused by the rumble of the mill that they were just passing and the din of the water flowing on to the wheels and under the sluices, which were open, on account of the spate. With a dull roar, it tumbled downwards, pounding to white foam before it cascaded, swirling and shining, in a broad stream into the river. At the miller's house, standing at the edge of the road, the lights were already lit and at a curtained window a lamp was visible on the table.

'They've a lamp like the priest or the manor ...'²

'Well off, aren't they? Miller's got more land than Boryna and he lends at interest, and don't he cheat at the grinding, eh?' Szymek went on.

'They live like manor folk ... It's all right for some ... Wandering through their rooms ... lying about on sofas ... sitting in the warm ... eating sweet stuff, and having other people work for them ...' she thought, but without envy, not listening to Szymek, who was taciturn as a rule, though once he got talking, there was no stopping him.

They made it home at last.

It was light and warm in the room, the fire crackling merrily in the stove. Jędrzych was peeling potatoes and the old woman setting the table for supper.

A grey old man was warming himself at the hearth.

'Are you done, Jagna?' her mother asked.

'Oh aye, there's no more than three sheetfuls left on the strip.'

She went off to the storeroom to change and was soon bustling about preparing the meal, glancing keenly and curiously at the old man, who sat deep in silence, gazing into the fire and telling his beads, running them through his fingers, his lips moving. When they sat down to supper, the old woman set a spoon for him too and invited him to sit down.

'God bless you, no ... I'll look in again – I may stay awhile in Lipce ...'

He then knelt down in the middle of the chamber, bowed before the pictures, crossed himself and went out.

'Who was that?' asked Jagna, surprised.

'A holy wanderer, he's been to Jesus' tomb ... I've known him since long ago, he's been here many a time and brought all manner of holy things ... Some three years ago ...'

She didn't finish because in came Ambrozy. He praised God in greeting and sat down at the fireside.

'It's foul out, that cold my wooden leg's frozen.'

'What are you doing, loitering at night in this mud ... You should be sitting at home and saying your prayers ...' muttered Dominikowa.

'It were dull alone, so I come out for the lasses and you're the first I've come to, Jagna ...'

'Grim Reaper is the name of your lass ...' the old woman responded.

'She's carousing with younger ones and forgotten all about me!'

'Oh yes?' Dominikowa asked.

'It's true. The good father's just been to Bartek's beyond the water with the Lord Jesus ...'³

'Never ... I saw him hale and hearty at the fair ...'

'His dear son-in-law walloped him that hard with a picket he ruptured his guts.'

'When? Why?'

'Land, what else? They'd been bickering half a year until they settled it today at noon.'

'You'd think God's punishment would fall on such thugs!' Jagna retorted.

'It will, Jagna, never you fear, it will,' the old woman said grimly, glancing up at the holy pictures.

'But he who's dead won't stand again,' Ambrozy whispered quietly.

'Sit down to the basin, and eat what there is.'

'Nay, I'm not here for that. But I can still manage a bowlful, as long as it's a big one,' he joked.

'You've nothing in your head but fun and mockery.'

'It's all I've got, so why should I worry?'

They settled on the bench where the bowls had been placed and ate slowly and in silence. Jędrzych took care to refill glasses and plates; Ambrozy alone threw in some droll comment now and then at which he himself laughed the most, for the boys, though glad of a joke, feared their mother's stern glare.

'Is the reverend at home?' she asked finally.

'Where'd he go in this mud? He's sitting like a Jew over his books.'

'Learned, he is, very learned ...'

'And good; you'll find none better ...' added Jagna.

'Aye ... for sure ... He don't spit on his own stomach or anyone's beard, and he'll take just whatever he's given ...'

'Stop your nonsense, now,' admonished Dominikowa.

They got up from supper. Jagna and the old woman sat down to their spinning before the hearth, and the sons as usual set about clearing up, washing the dishes and doing the chores. It had always been Dominikowa's way to rule her sons with an iron hand and she taught them to be deft as lasses – anything to save Jagusia's precious hands.

Ambrozy lit his pipe, puffing into the chimney, or prodded the faggots and added wood and kept glancing at the women, weighing and framing something in his mind.

'Matchmakers been?'

'More than once.'

'No surprise. Jagna's pretty as a picture. The priest said you'll not find a greater beauty even in town.'

Jagna blushed with pleasure.

'Did he now! God grant him health! I've been meaning to have a votive Mass said. I'll do it tomorrow for sure.'

'There's someone who'd send round the vodka, but he's a tad wary ...' he began quietly.

'A farmhand?' asked the old woman, winding the spindle which was rattling along the floor.

'A fine farmer born and bred ... but widowed.'

'I'm not rocking someone else's babes ...'

'They're grown already, Jagna, never fear.'

'What's she want with an old man ... she's time yet ... she can wait for a young one to turn up.'

'She'll not go short of that kind – aren't there young ones aplenty? Lads straight as candles, they smoke, dance at the inn, drink vodka and chase only them girls that have a few morgen and some ready cash, so there's something to fund their fun ... Fine farmers, the scoundrels, sleep till midday, and in the afternoon they cart dung in barrows and plough their fields with hoes ...'

'I'll not hand Jagna over to such disregard.'

'They don't say you're the smartest in the village for nothing ...'

'But there's little mirth for a young woman with an old man ...'

'Are there not young ones for mirth?'

'Old as the world you are, and still know no better,' she said sternly.

'Eh ... it is but talk; limbers the tongue.'

There was a long silence.

'An old man'll esteem her and has no greed for another's money,' Ambrozy took up again.

'No, no, it always ends by offending God.'

'He could settle something on her,' he said gravely, emptying his pipe into the fireplace.

'Jagna has enough of her own,' she said after a moment, hesitant now and unsure.

'He'd give more than he'd take, much more ...'

'You don't say!'

'Of course, I didn't hear it on the wind nor is it my own fancy – I've not come on my own account ...'

They fell silent again. The old woman smoothed the tangled distaff, then she wet her finger and began to draw out the flaxen threads with her left hand, letting the spindle spin in her right, so that it droned like a spinning top, whirling and buzzing on the floor.

'Well? Shall he send them round?'

'Who send them?'

'Do you not know? Why him yonder!' He pointed through the window at the barely twinkling lights across the pond, at Boryna's place.

'Grown children; they'll not have a kind word and have a right besides to their own portions ...'

'But he can surely settle what's his own ... how else? A good man too and not just any farmer, and devout, and strong still – I saw myself how he hoisted a bushel of rye on his shoulders. Jagna would have to wish for the moon to feel the lack of something there ... and since your Jędrzych is up for the army next year ... Boryna knows all the officials and who to ask. He can help ...'

'What do you think, Jagna?'

'It's all the same to me. If you say I must, I'll go ... it's up to you, not me ...' she said quietly. She leaned her head against the distaff and gazed into the fire vacantly, listening to the merry crackle of the twigs. This one, that one, it was all the same to her – only the memory of Antek jolted her a little.

'Well?' asked Ambrozy, rising from the bench.

'Let them send it round ... betrothal's not marriage ...' she replied slowly.

Ambrozy crossed himself and went straight to Boryna's.

Jagna went on sitting, silent and motionless.

'Jagna, dear ... my girl ... what is it?'

'Nothing ... it's all the same ... If you say so, I'll marry Boryna ... If not, I'll stay with you ... Am I not just fine right here?'

The old woman went on spinning and said quietly:

'I want what's best for you, what's best ... Aye, he's old, but strong still, and decent, not like other men, he'll respect you ... you'll be mistress there, woman of the house ... And if he settles something on you, I'll fix it so the portion falls beside ours, near the rye on the hillside ... and maybe he'll sign over even six morgen ... do you hear? Six! And you must be married ... you must ... for is everyone to talk about you, and spread gossip round the village? ... We'd slaughter a hog ... or maybe not ... maybe ...' She fell silent and went on reckoning the rest in her head, for Jagna seemed not to be listening but went on spinning mechanically, with not a thought of this marriage, as though her own fate were a matter of indifference to her.

For wasn't she happy at her mother's? She did as she liked and never heard an ill word. What did she care about portions and settlements and property? Next to nothing, a husband included. Was she short of lads running after her? They'd all send round on the same evening at her slightest whim ... Her thoughts trailed lazily like the flax thread from the spindle and, like that thread, spun always around the fact that if her mother ordered it, she'd take Boryna ... Aye, she even preferred him to the rest, for he'd bought her a ribbon and kerchief ... aye ... but Antek would have bought the same ... and others too, maybe ... if they only had Boryna's money ... didn't matter which of 'em ... all of 'em together ... how was she meant to choose! That was her mother's business, to act for the best ...

She stared at the window, lost in thought again, where the darkened wilted dahlias, swaying in the wind, were peering through the panes, but she soon forgot them, forgot everything, even herself. She fell into a blissful torpor, like her native earth on dead autumn nights – for like the earth beneath her was Jagna's soul; yes, like that earth. It lay in depths unknown to anyone, in the chaos of slumbering dreams; immense, but oblivious of its immensity; powerful, yet without will, without desire or volition; lifeless, yet immortal. And, like this earth, every coming gale seized, embraced and rocked it, bearing it off wherever it pleased. And just like the earth, the sun woke it in spring, filled it with life, set it trembling with love and desire. And it would give birth, because it must: it lives, sings, reigns, creates and destroys ... it exists because it must ... for as this earth was holy, so was Jagna's soul ... just like this earth!

She sat a long time in this silence, only her starry eyes shining like calm waters on a spring afternoon, when suddenly she started, for someone was opening the door to the hallway.

Józka ran in, breathless, fell upon the hearth, shook the water from her clogs and said:

'Jagna will you come to ours tomorrow for the cabbage trimming?'

'I will.'

'We'll do it in the big room. Ambrozy's in there with *Tatula*, so I slipped out to tell you. Ulisia will be there, and Marysia and Witka, and the Pocioteks and some others ... And the boys'll come ... Pietrek promised he'd come with the fiddle ...'

'Which one's that?'

'Michał's boy, them with the cottage behind the Voyt, that came back from the army during digging⁴ ... and speaks that odd you can't make him out ...'

She chattered away at top speed and rushed home.

The room was quiet again.

Sometimes the rain would dash against the windowpanes as though someone were throwing a handful of sand, or the wind soughed and romped in the orchard or blew down the chimney, scattering the firebrands on to the hearth, and smoke belched into the room ... while the spindles whirled constantly on the floor.

The evening wore on, long and slow, until the old woman began to sing in a quiet quavering voice 'All Our Daily Cares'⁵.

And Jagna and the boys accompanied her softly, but in voices so high-pitched that the hens on their perches in the hallway began to cluck and cackle.

CHAPTER 7

The following day was just as rainy and gloomy.

Every now and then, someone would emerge from a cottage and stand peering worriedly into the mist to see if it wasn't brightening somewhere, but nothing could be seen beyond the dun clouds, floating so low they caught against the trees. The rain drizzled endlessly until noon, when it turned into a downpour and drummed upon the roofs, as though someone had opened the heavenly floodgates.

People were fair stewing at home; one or two clambered through the mud and ran to their neighbours to complain the weather wasn't fit even for a dog. Many folk still had leaf litter to collect in the forest, others had not yet carted back their wood, and others still, almost all in fact, had not finished cutting cabbages, and now it was impossible to fetch them, for the pond had risen so high overnight that they'd had to open the sluices completely to release the water into the river, which overflowed as a result, until the meadows were flooded and the cabbage patches poked up like black islands along the ridges amid the foaming ash-grey depths.

At Dominikowa's, too, they had not fetched the rest of the cabbages still in the field.

Jagna had been out of sorts since the morning; she wandered from corner to corner, or looked out into the rainy world at the clumps of dahlias, flattened by the downpour, and sighed miserably.

'Lord, how dull it is!' she whispered, awaiting dusk with impatience so she could go to Boryna's for the cabbage trimming, and here the day was crawling by so slowly, like an old man in the mud, so tedious, so dispiriting, that it was nigh-on unbearable. She was so irritable that she harangued the boys constantly and flung aside anything that fell to hand, and to top it all, her head ached and she had to spread toasted oats moistened with vinegar on her crown before it would stop. Despite this, she could not settle to anything and her work slipped from her hands while she stared at the choppy pond, which spread and beat its heavy wings like a bird noisily straining to rise, sending water spraying on to the roads, but which could not fly away, as though its legs had taken root in the ground. And beyond the water stood Boryna's house. The roof, green with age, could be seen clearly, and the porch covered with new, still-yellowing shingles, and the outbuildings beyond the orchard, but she didn't really know what she was looking at ...

Dominikowa had been out since early morning, for since she was a healer and knowledgeable about all kinds of ailments, she'd been summoned to a woman in labour at the other end of the village.

Meanwhile, Jagna was desperate to escape outside, to see someone, but as soon as she wrapped an apron around her head and peered from the threshold at the mud and bluster, she lost her desire for anything ... This strange yearning was driving her to tears ... and unable to help herself, she opened her trunk and began taking out and arranging her best clothes on the beds ... until the room glowed red with striped woollen skirts ... aprons, waistcoats, but no, these did not please her today ... She surveyed her possessions with bored, indifferent eyes, and pulled out only Boryna's kerchief and ribbon from beneath, arrayed herself and took a long look in the mirror.

'Not bad ... I should put them on come evening,' she thought, then quickly took them off, for someone was approaching the cottage through the farmyard.

Mateusz entered ... Jagna exclaimed in surprise, for he was the one she'd been accused most often of meeting in the orchard at night, and many other places besides ... He was an older fellow, well past thirty now, and a bachelor still, for he had no mind to marry, since he had sisters at home and, as Jagustynka was wont to gossip, lasses or other people's wives were more to his taste ... He was sturdy as an oak, strong, sure of himself and arrogant as a result, not to mention intractable, so there were few who did not fear him. And the rascal could set his hand to anything: when he played the pipe, it reached right into your soul; he could build a cart, put up a house, fashion a stove, and did everything so skilfully that the work went like the clappers. Only money would not stick to him somehow, for although he earned plenty, he soon drank his way through the lot or squandered and loaned it ... They nicknamed him the Dove,¹ though his face and quick temper made him more of a hawk ...

'Praised be!'

'For ever ... Mateusz!'

'Aye, Jagna, it's me ...'

He squeezed her hand and looked into her eyes with such ardour the girl blushed and glanced nervously at the door.

'You've been away half the year ...' she whispered in confusion.

'Half the year and three-and-twenty days ... by my reckoning ...' He did not release her hand.

'I'll light the lamp!' she exclaimed to get away from him since it had now grown completely dark.

'Greet me, Jagna,' he begged quietly and made to embrace her, but she slipped away quickly and went to the fireplace to light the lamp, for she was afraid her mother or someone else might find them in the dark. But before she could, Mateusz seized her waist and pulled her hard against him and began kissing her passionately ...

She fluttered like a bird, but hadn't the strength to break free of the grasp of such a ravenous beast who clutched her until her ribs cracked and whose kisses made her weaken until her eyes misted over. Unable to catch her breath, she could only whimper:

'Let go ... Mateusz ... my mother ...'

'Just a bit, Jagna, just once more, or I'll go mad ...' And he kissed her so that the girl went completely limp, pouring through his hands like water. Hearing steps in the hallway, he let her go, lit the lamp above the stove himself, rolled a cigarette and, eyes sparkling with pleasure, he looked at Jagna, who was yet to come round and could but clutch at the wall, panting heavily.

Jędrzych entered and blew on the fire in the stove, putting on the pans of water and busying himself about the room, so that the pair spoke little now but just glanced at each other with hungry glinting eyes as though they wanted to devour each other ...

Soon, in the space of a couple of prayers, Dominikowa arrived but she must have been angry, for she had already given Szymek a mouthful in the hallway and, seeing Mateusz, she glared at him and did not deign to greet him but went into the storeroom to change.

'Go away, or Mother will curse you yet,' Jagna pleaded quietly.

'Will you come meet me, Jagna?' he begged.

'You're back, then?' the old woman said, as though she'd only just noticed him.

'I am, Mother ...' he said meekly and made to kiss her hand.

'Ha, you've a bitch for a mother, not me!' she snarled, snatching her hand away in anger. 'What are you doing here? I've told you already, there's nothing for you here ...'

'I've come to see Jagna, not you,' he cried boldly, exasperated now.

'Stay away from Jagna, d'you hear? Hands off, setting tongues wagging in the village on your account, dragging her name through the mud ... Out of my sight!' she yelled.

'You're cackling loud as a crow for the whole village to hear!'

'Let them hear, let them come running and see how you've latched on to Jagna like a burr to a dog's tail, so it's hard to drive you off with a broomstick!'

'If you weren't a woman, I'd soon crush your ribs for talk like that ...'

'Just try it, you thug, just try, you dog!' She snatched up an iron poker. But there it ended, for Mateusz spat and left quickly, slamming the door, for was he to fight with a woman and make himself a laughing stock in the village?

With him gone, the old woman set upon Jagna, scolding and venting for all she was worth ... Jagna sat quietly, almost frozen with alarm, but when her mother's words had sunk in, they pierced her to the quick and she started. Hiding her face in the quilt, she burst into tears and denials ... She was mightily aggrieved ... for she was not at all to blame ... she hadn't asked him to the house ... he'd come himself ... And that time back in the spring that her mother was reproaching her with ... why ... he'd met her at the stile ... could she get free of such a beast? When she'd come over so faint ... and after ... how was she to keep him off? It was always happening to her: someone had only to fix her with a look or clap her ... and she'd tremble all over, her will drained away and she'd swoon inside till she lost sense of anything ... How was it her fault?

She protested quietly through her tears until the old woman softened and began wiping her face and eyes solicitously and stroking her head and soothing her ...

'Quiet now, Jaguś, don't cry now ... no ... Your eyes'll be red as a rabbit's and how will you go to the Borynas?'

'Is it time, then?' she asked a moment later, somewhat calmer.

'It is, aye. Dress up nicely now, there'll be plenty of folk, and Boryna will notice too ...'

Jagna rose immediately and began to dress.

'Shall I boil you some milk?'

'No, Ma, I'm not hungry at all.'

'Szymek, the cows are ringing their teeth against an empty manger while you're sat there warming yourself!' the old woman yelled, still simmering with anger, and Szymek ran away so as not to catch it.

'Seems to me,' she said more quietly, helping Jagna to change, 'that the blacksmith has made peace with Boryna. I met him – he were leading a fine bullock the old man had given ... Pity ... must be worth fifteen notes ... but maybe it's just as well they're at peace. The smith's a loudmouth and he knows the law ...' She took a few steps back and surveyed her daughter with pleasure.

'But I hear that thief Koziol's out already. We'll have to lock everything up and be on our guard again ...'

'I'll be off then!'

'Go then, and sit about till midnight romping with the farmhands, why don't you!' she exploded with the remnants of her anger.

Jagna went out, but from the road she could still hear the old woman shouting at Jędrej that the pigs had not been brought into the sty and the chickens were roosting in the trees.

There was quite a crowd already at Boryna's.

The fire crackled in the chimney and lit up the enormous chamber, making the glazed pictures shine and the coloured wafer globes² sway as they hung by threads from the smoke-blackened beams. A heap of red cabbages lay in the middle of the room and in a wide half-circle, their faces to the fire, girls and a few older women were sitting in rows, peeling the outer leaves from the cabbages and throwing the heads on to a sheet spread below the window. After warming her hands at the stove, Jagna left her clogs by the window, sat down at the end by old Jagustynka and set to work.

The room grew noisier as more women arrived, and a few lads too, who helped Kuba carry cabbages from the barn, but more often than not they stood smoking and grinning at the girls and larking about together.

Józka, though little more than a child, led the work and the laughter, as the old man was not there, and Hanka, as usual, was flitting about tight-lipped, like a moth.

'It's red as poppies blooming in here!' called Antek, who had been rolling barrels into the hallway, and was now standing by the cabbage shredder to one side of the fire.

'Bah, all dressed up like it's a wedding!' an older woman piped up.

'And Jagna looks like she's been dipped in milk,' Jagustynka began spitefully.

'Give over,' Jagna whispered, blushing.

'Cheer up, girls. Mateusz is back from his wand'rings; it'll be music and dancing in no time, and loitering in the orchards ...' the old woman went on.

'He's been gone all summer.'

'Aye, building a manor at Wola.'

'Master builder, the bugger, right full of himself,' one of the farmhands said.

'And that nifty with the lasses, you barely need wait three seasons ...'

'Jagustynka hasn't a good word for anyone,' began one of the girls.

'Mind I don't find something to say about you ...'

'You know, that old wanderer has turned up.'

'He's coming to ours today!' cried Józka.

'Three years he's been away.'

'Away? He's been to Jesus' tomb!'

'Ha! Did anyone see him there! Lies like a Gypsy and stupid folk believe him; just like the blacksmith with his tales of foreign lands that he's read about in the papers ...'

'Oh stop, Jagustynka. The priest himself said so to my mother.'

'True, the presbytery's practically Dominikowa's second home and she's always first to know if the priest's got the stomach ache – a healer, after all ...'

Jagna fell silent, but had a strange urge to jab her with her knife, for the whole room had snorted with laughter. All except Ulisia Grzegorzowa, who leaned towards Kłab's wife and asked:

'Where's he from?'

'Where? From far away, who knows?' She bent down, taking a cabbage in her hand and cutting away the leaves before saying quickly, and more loudly so that the others could hear too: 'Every third winter he comes to Lipce and stays with Boryna ... He says to call him Roch, but that's like as not his name ... Maybe he's a beggar and maybe not, who knows ... but he's a pious man and good ... Put a halo round his head and he'd look just like one o' them saints in the pictures. He's got a rosary round his neck that's touched Jesus' tomb ... gives pictures o' saints to the bairns, and to others pictures o' kings who once ruled our land ... and he's got prayer books with everything in 'em, stories and that, about the world ... He read 'em to my Walek, so me and my husband listened but I've forgotten, it was hard to make out ... And so pious he is, he kneels half the day, and then again at the cross or somewhere in the field ... and only goes into church for Mass. The reverend asked him to stay at the presbytery, but he says:

"I shall stay with the people. My place is not in fancy rooms ..."

'Everyone knows he's no peasant though he talks like everyone else, and he's learned. Aye, he talked German with the Jew, and at the manor in Drzazgowa he talked a foreign language with the young miss who's been in warm countries for her health ... And he'll not take a thing from anyone, no more than a drop o' milk and a piece o' bread, and teaches the children too, they say ...' But Kłab's wife broke off suddenly, for the girls had burst out laughing and were almost keeling over.

They were laughing at Kuba, who'd been given a push while carrying in cabbages in a sheet. He went sprawling across the middle of the room so that cabbages flew everywhere, and as soon as he was up on all fours, they pushed him over again.

Józka ran to his defence and helped him up, but, oh, how he railed.

And the talk moved on slowly to other things.

Everyone spoke quietly, and the room hummed like a hive before a swarming. There was such laughter and jesting and fun that eyes sparkled and voices rang with laughter, and the work sped along, knives flicked across the stumps, and cabbage heads fell like cannonballs again and again on to the sheet and rose in an ever-growing heap.

Antek, meanwhile, was shredding the cabbage finely over an enormous barrel by the fireplace. He was in his shirtsleeves and striped woollen breeches, red in the face, his hair tousled and his forehead streaming with sweat. He worked hard but laughed and joked all the while, and was so handsome that Jagna gazed at him as though at a picture; nor was she the only one ... When he paused to take a breath he would fix her with such a merry look that she dropped her eyes and blushed. But no one noticed save Jagustynka, and she pretended not to see, just turned over in her mind how to tell it round the village.

'Did you know Marcycha's given birth?' began Kłab's wife.

'That's no news, same every year.'

'The woman's a bison – the kids help draw down the blood from her head,' muttered Jagustynka, and wanted to say more on the subject, but the others scolded her for talking of such things in front of the lasses.

'They know more than that besides, don't you worry. Such times have come you can't even tell the goose girl about the stork or she'll laugh in your face ... Weren't always so, oh no ...'

'Well, you certainly knew everything when you were still herding cows ...' said old Wawrzonowa gravely. 'Don't I remember what you got up to in the pasture ...'

'Well, since you remember, keep it to yourself!' shrieked Jagustynka.

'I'd had one man already ... Mateusz, I think ... no, Michał, yes – aye, Wawrzon were the third ...' she muttered, unable to pinpoint exactly.

'What, you're all sitting here and don't know what's happened!' Mateusz's sister, Nastusia Gołębianka, burst in, breathless.

Eager questions flew from every side and all eyes were upon her.

'They've stolen the miller's horses!'

'When?'

'Oh, three prayers since. Jankiel just told Mateusz.'

'Jankiel knows everything straight off, if not before.'

'Such horses too, giants!'

'They took 'em out the stable. The farmhand went to the mill for fodder. He comes back and there's no horses, no harness, and the dog in the kennel's been poisoned, ha!'

'Winter's coming, so there's all sorts afoot.'

'Cause there's no punishment for thievery. Ha, what'll they do? Stick 'em in the jail and give 'em sommat to eat, where they'll sit nice and warm, pick up some tricks from their mates, and when they let 'em go, they'll be better thieves than ever after all that schoolin'.'

'If they took my horse like that and I caught 'em, I'd wallop 'em right there like a rabid dog!'³ yelled one of the farmhands.

'That's all they'd deserve – you'd be stupid to look for justice in this world. Everyone's got a right to settle their own wrongs.'

'Catch one of 'em and do 'im in, everyone together – that'll fix it. They'll not punish everyone, will they?'

'I remember ... same happened at ours ... wait, I was with my second husband, no, I think still with Mateusz ...' said Wawrzonowa.

But these pronouncements were interrupted by Boryna's entrance.

'You're chattering that loud I could hear from the other side of the pond!' he called out merrily, taking off his cap and greeting each one in turn. He must have had a drop already, for his face was red as a capon's. He unbuttoned his capote and talked loudly and constantly, which he did not as a rule. He wanted to sit by Jagna, but hesitated, with everyone's eyes upon him, while there was yet no agreement, so he only chatted cheerfully and looked at her happily, so beautiful she was today and all dressed up in his kerchief.

Before long, Witek and Kuba carried another bench to the fireside and Józka covered it with a clean linen cloth and began to arrange the bowls and spoons for supper.

Boryna, meanwhile, brought a squat bottle of *okowitka*, two quarts at least,⁴ from the storeroom and began to do the rounds, toasting each one in turn.

The girls drew back, until one of the farmhands said:

'They're as greedy for vodka as a cat for milk. They just want to look reluctant.'

'Godforsaken drunk himself – always at Jankiel's! He thinks everyone's the same!'

And the girls would drink, turn away and cover their faces with their hands, dashing the rest to the floor, then grimace, exclaim, 'It's so strong!' and hand the glass back to Boryna.

Only Jagna refused and wouldn't drink, despite urgings and encouragement.

'I've never tasted spirits and I don't care to,' she said.

'Come, sit down, dear friends. Let's eat what there is!' the old man invited them.

They sat down at the bench after some ceremony, as custom required, and ate slowly, chatting from time to time.

Steam rose from the bowls, veiling everyone in a cloud, with only the scraping of spoons, the smacking of lips and the occasional word to be heard.

They'd prepared a fine spread to the surprise of many a guest, for there were potatoes and broth and boiled meat with roast barley groats, and cabbage-with-peas. The hosts were generous, in the country way, with Boryna urging and cajoling all the while, and Józia for her part and Hanka too taking care that plates and glasses were always full ...

Witek threw some dried roots on the fire, making it crackle cheerfully, while Kuba carried on fetching cabbages and tipping them on to the pile while they were eating. Sniffing the aromas greedily, he licked his lips and sighed.

'I could eat half an ox with a bowl or two of groats ... and that lot are guzzling like starved horses, and don't care to leave a body even a morsel,' he thought glumly and tightened his belt, his stomach was rumbling so with hunger.

But they soon finished and got up, bidding "God bless!" to their hosts.

'To your good health,' came the reply.

A clatter arose as some went out to take the air and stretch their legs, some to see if the sky was brightening, and the farmhands to romp with the girls.

Kuba sat on the threshold, bowl on his knees, and gobbled down his food, ignoring Łapa, who was trying to catch his attention in every possible way and, seeing it was useless, moved off to the porch to join the dogs folk had brought, which were gnawing the bones Józia had tossed them.

They were just settling back to work when Rocho appeared in the doorway with a greeting.

'For ever, amen!' they chorused in reply.

'Grab a plate before it's too late ... You're tardy, but we'll find you something ...' called Boryna, pulling a stool up to the fireside.

'Some bread and milk will do me, Józia.'

'A little bit o' meat too,' Hanka spoke up timidly.

'No, God bless – I don't eat meat.'

They were quiet at first, eyeing him with friendly curiosity, but once he had sat down to eat, the conversation and laughter revived.

Only Jagna sat silent. She kept glancing at the wanderer, amazed that this person, no different from any other, should have been at Jesus' tomb, crossed half the world and seen so many wonders ... What must the world be like, she thought. Where did you go to get there? There were only villages and fields and forests round about, and beyond them more villages and fields and forests ...

You'd have to go a hundred miles, maybe a thousand,⁵ she thought, and had a strange desire to ask, but how could she? He'd only laugh at her.

Rafał's boy, back from the army, brought his fiddle, tuned it and began to play all manner of songs.

A hush descended, with only the rain whipping against the panes and the dogs yapping in front of the house. And he played on, something new every time, his fingers picking the strings and drawing the bow across them so that the tune seemed to escape by itself ... He played hymns, no doubt for that wanderer whose eyes never left him, and then other completely worldly songs, about Jas who was off to war and which the girls often sang in the fields ... And he drew the notes out so plaintively from the strings that a cold shiver ran through everyone's bones, and Jagna, who was more sensitive to music than most, felt the tears stream down her face.

'Oh stop, Jagna's crying!' Nastka called.

'No ... it's nothing ... playing always upsets me ... no ...' she whispered, embarrassed, and hid her face in her apron.

But it made no difference, for she couldn't help it – the tears fell all of their own accord in that strange yearning that had risen in her heart for who knows what ...

But the boy did not stop his playing, except that now he struck up a spirited mazurka or an *oberek*⁶ so that the girls could not sit still, but just squeezed their knees together, twitching with delight and jiggling their shoulders. The farmhands tapped their feet and hummed along merrily, so that the room filled with a hubbub of stamping and laughter, until the panes shook.

Suddenly a dog began to yelp in the hallway with such a terrible howling that everyone fell silent.

'What's happened?'

Roch dashed to the hallway so quickly that he nearly tripped over the shredder.

'Eh, it's nothing ... some boy trapped a dog by its tail in the door and there's your howling!' cried Antek, looking out.

'Witek, I'll bet,' Boryna remarked.

'As if Witek would hurt a dog when he collects strays from all over the village and cures 'em,' Józia defended him fiercely.

Roch returned full of wrath. He must have freed the dog, for its howling could be heard away in the farmyard.

'A dog is God's creature too and suffers wrong like any human being ... Jesus had his own little dog and let no one hurt it ...' he said on an impulse.

'Jesus had a little dog, like everyone else?' Jagustynka was doubtful.

'Indeed he did, and called him Burek ...'

'Ha! Well, I never!' curious voices exclaimed.

Roch was silent a moment, and then he raised his head, fringed with long grey hair trimmed straight over his forehead, fixed his pale eyes, as though faded by tears, on the fire and spoke quietly, fingering the beads of his rosary ...

'Long, long ago it was ... when the Lord Jesus still walked the earth and ruled the people himself, that what I tell you now took place ...

'The Lord was walking to Mstowo, for the indulgences, and there was no path anywhere, only harsh burning sands, for the sun blazed down and was parching hot as before a storm and shade or shelter was there none. The Lord Jesus walked with great patience, for it was still a fair way to the forest, but since his dear holy feet were near numb from exhaustion and he cruelly wanted a drink, he would sit down now and then on a sandy hillock, though that was hotter still and only coral necklace⁷ grew there, and no shade to be had but from the dried-up mullein stalks, so that even a little bird would find no shelter ...

'But even when he paused he could not take a proper rest, for straight away that plague-ridden Evil One, like that nasty hawk which swoops upon a weary little bird from above, beat his cloven hooves in the sand and wallowed like cattle do, raising such a dust storm, such darkness, that the world could not be seen ... The Lord Jesus, though his breast was heaving and he could barely move, got up and went on and just laughed at that fool, for he knew the Evil One wanted to make him lose his way, to keep him from reaching the indulgences and saving sinful folk ...

'So the Lord Jesus walked ... and walked ... until he reached a forest ...

'He took a good rest in the shade, cooled himself with water and had a bite on something from his bag, then he broke off a solid staff, crossed himself and plunged among the trees.

'It was an ancient forest and dense, with impenetrable bogs, undergrowth and swamps such that the Evil One himself must have put there, and thickets no bird could penetrate. Only the Lord Jesus entered – and then didn't the Evil One begin to shake the forest, didn't he start to howl, didn't he set about ripping up the spruces, and the wind, like his infernal servant, helped to blast and snatch up brushwood, tear up the oaks, grab at branches, and roared and rumbled about the forest like a madman.

'Now it had grown black as pitch – and here came a hum and there came a clatter ... and yon a gale ... and here some creatures sprang out, brood of the devil, baring their fangs ... snarling and threatening ... their eyes glinting and just about to spring upon him with their claws ... only they dare not, for after all ... it was the Lord Jesus in his holy person ...

'But the Lord had had enough of this foolish menacing, and since time was pressing now, he blessed the wood and immediately all the evil spirits and their cronies vanished in the swamps.

'Only a wild dog was left, for in those times there was no bond between dog and man.

'This dog remained and flew at the Lord Jesus. He barked, snatched at his holy feet, snapped his teeth at his breeches, tore his capote and grabbed at his bag, scrabbling for the meat inside ... But the Lord Jesus, since he was merciful and did no harm to any living creature, though he could have driven the dog off with his staff or even killed him with a thought, said only:

"Here, you fool, a bit of bread since you're hungry," and threw him some from the bag.

'But the dog was enraged and just bared his fangs in fury and growled and bayed and was now almost tearing the Lord's breeches to pieces.

"Bread I gave you, I did you no harm, and you tear my clothes and bark in vain. Foolish you are, my little dog, for you do not recognize your master. You will serve man for it now, and be helpless without him," said the Lord Jesus firmly, until the dog sat down on his haunches, then turned and, tail between his legs, he howled, and like a stupefied creature fled into the wide world.

'And the Lord Jesus arrived at the indulgences.

'The place was as full of people as trees in a forest or grass in the meadow, so crowded was it. But in the church it was empty, for there was music at the inn, and a fair before the very porch, with the usual drunkenness and dissipation and effrontery to God. Out came the Lord Jesus after the High Mass and was watching when suddenly the people, like wheat in the wind, swayed this way and that and broke into a run. One rushed forward with a switch, another pulled a picket from a fence, yet another reached for a stake and another for a stone, and the women shrieked and scrambled up the fences or on to carts and the children were bleating and all of them crying: "Mad dog, mad dog!"

'And the dog rushed right among the people, when suddenly the crowd parted and, tongue hanging out, he made straight for the Lord Jesus.

'Our Lord did not flinch, oh no ... he saw it was the selfsame dog from the forest, so he only spread wide his holy capote and said to the beast which had stopped short:

"Come here, Burek, you're safer by my side than in the forest."

'He covered the dog with the capote, spread his arms over him and said:

"Do not kill him, good people, for he too is God's creation, and poor he is, and hungry, hunted and without a master."

'But the villagers began to shout, and object, and murmur, and beat their staffs against the ground: that it was a wild beast and a savage one, that he had already snatched so many goslings and sheep, that he was always doing harm, and would not even spare a human being, but just snapped with his fangs so that no one could go out without a stick, for none were safe with that hellhound at large ... and he must be killed.

'And they made to drag the dog by force from under the Lord Jesus' capote and slaughter him. Until the Lord Jesus grew angry and shouted:
 "None of you touch him! Rogues and drunkards, you fear a dog, but you have no fear of the Lord God, eh?"
 "They shrank back, he spoke so fiercely. The Lord Jesus went on: he told them what rogues they were – they came for the indulgences, but only drank in the taverns and offended God and did no penance – and cursed they were, no better than brutes to each other, thieves and godless, and divine retribution would not pass them by. The Lord Jesus finished, lifted his staff and made to leave ...
 'But the people had recognized him now and how they flung themselves to their knees in front of him, how they burst into tears, how they began to whimper:
 "Stay with us, Lord! Stay, Lord Jesus Christ! Stay! We'll be faithful as that dog, drunken and godless as we are, and wicked, but stay! Punish us, beat us, but stay! Poor abandoned wretches with no master ..." They cried and they begged and they kissed his hands and his holy feet, so that the Lord's heart softened and he stayed with them for the space of a few prayers; he preached to them and absolved their sins and blessed them all.
 'And then, when he was leaving, he said:
 "Has any dog done you harm? From now on, he will serve you. He'll watch your geese and round up your sheep, and when one or other of you are dead drunk, he'll guard your property and livestock and be your friend. Just take care of him and do him no harm."
 'And just as the Lord Jesus was setting off into the wide world, he turned round – and there sat Burek, at the spot where he'd defended him.
 "Hey, Burek, come with me then, silly dog – are you staying here all alone?"
 'And up gets the dog and follows the Master everywhere, as quiet, as watchful, as faithful as the best of farmhands. And from then on they went everywhere together. Through forest and across the sea – the whole world over. And since they were often hungry, the dog would track down a bird, or bring a goose or sheep, and so they lived together. And many a time and oft, when dear weary Jesus was resting, Burek would chase away evil folk or wild beasts and would not let them near our Lord, oh no ...
 'When the time came for the nasty Jews and the ferocious Pharisees to lead our Lord to his martyrdom, then Burek fell upon them all and began to bite them and defend him for all he was worth, the poor dear wretch.
 'And Jesus said to him from under the tree that he was dragging to his holy passion:
 "Their consciences will bite them sharper than your teeth ... you can do nothing here ..."
 'And when they hung him on the tree, then Burek sat and howled ...
 'The next day when all the people had gone, and not even the blessed lady was there nor the holy apostles ... only Burek was left ...
 'Again and again he licked those holy dying feet of the Lord, pierced with nails, and howled and howled ...
 'And when the third day came ... the Lord Jesus started and looked and there was no one at the foot of the cross ... only Burek whining miserably, huddling against his feet ...
 'So Our Most Holy Lord Jesus Christ looked on him with mercy in that hour and said with his last breath:
 "Burek, come with me!"
 'And in the wink of an eye, the little dog breathed his last breath and followed the Master ...
 'Amen.⁸
 'And that's how it was, dear people!' Roch said mildly, crossing himself as he finished, and went to the other side of the house, where Hanka had already prepared him a place to sleep, since he was very tired.
 A dead silence filled the room. They all pondered this strange tale, and some of the girls, Jagna, Józka and Nastka, furtively wiped their eyes. The Lord's fate and Burek's adventure had moved them to tenderness, and all were struck by the thought of there being such a dog in the world, better than people and more faithful to the Lord, and they began slowly and quietly commenting and exclaiming over this divine twist of fate, until Jagustynka, who had been listening keenly, lifted her head, gave a mocking laugh and declared:
 'Fiddle faddle, an hour's work in the tree and apples but three! I'll tell you a better tale of how man came to have the ox:
*'A bull the Lord God made.
 A bull there was.
 Man takes a blade,
 Snicks off below,
 An ox in one go!
 And there's an ox.*
 'There, my true tale's as good as Roch's!' And she began to laugh. Peals of laughter filled the room and soon jokes and tales and all manner of tittle-tattle rang out.
 'There's nothing Jagustynka doesn't know.'
 'Well, three times a widow, she's learned plenty.'
 'Aye, one learned her in the mornings with his whip ... the second with a strap in the afternoons, and the third chased her of an evening with a stake,' Rafal called.
 'And I'd take a fourth, but not you, for you're too stupid and go round snotty as a Jew,' replied Jagustynka.
 'Like Jesus' dog couldn't get by with no master, so a woman can't do without a beating ... that's what makes Jagustynka so disgruntled ...' threw in one of the farmhands.
 'Fool ... mind no one sees you stealing your father's grain for Jankiel, and let widowhood be, since it's beyond your ken,' she retorted sharply, silencing them, for they feared she might say aloud all that she knew, and that could be plenty. A contrary woman she was, obstinate and knowing her own mind on everything, so that people's flesh crawled and their hair stood on end sometimes, the way she respected nothing, neither priest nor church. More than once the reverend had rebuked her and urged her to reflect, but to no avail, for afterwards she'd go about the village saying:
 'Anyone, if he be but honest, can reach God without yon priest; he'd do better to watch his housekeeper, for she's got a third on the way and will drop it again somewhere ...'
 That was Jagustynka for you.
 They were preparing to leave when in came the Voyt and Soltys, doing the rounds of the houses, as tomorrow, according to plan, the peasants had corvée⁹ to do on the road where it had been washed away by the rains, beyond the mill ...
 But the Voyt had barely entered when he spread his arms and exclaimed:
 'The old man's mustered all the very best girls, the old beggar!'
 He spoke true, for they were farmers' daughters one and all, local born – and with dowries.
 Boryna was first farmer in the village, after all. Was he to gather and invite serving girls, hired hands or some other poor wretches who hang ten to a cow's tail?
 The Voyt chatted to one side with the old man, but so quietly that no one heard, then he laughed with the girls and quickly left, for he still had to summon half the village for the next day. Soon all the rest began to disperse, since it was late and there wasn't much cabbage left to trim. Boryna thanked each one individually, and opened the door to see the older women out.
 On departing, Jagustynka said loudly:
 'God bless for the hospitality, though it was not all it could be.'
 'Ha! Well ...'
 'You lack a woman about the house, Maciej. There's no proper order otherwise ...'
 'What's to be done, my dears? ... What's to be done? ... It was God's will ...'
 'Are there not enough girls about! Why, every Thursday they're on the lookout in the village to see if the matchmaker's not heading somewhere from yours ...' she said slyly, drawing him by the tongue, but Boryna, though he had an answer, only scratched his head and smiled, and instinctively his eyes sought Jagna, who was preparing to leave ...
 Antek, too, was waiting for that. He dressed unnoticed and went out ahead.
 Jagna was walking home alone, for the rest lived on the other side of the village, towards the mill.
 'Jagna!' he whispered, emerging from the darkness by a fence.
 She stopped, recognizing his voice, and began to tremble a little.
 'I'll walk you home, Jagna!' Antek looked about – it was a dark starless night, the wind blew above and tossed the trees.
 He put his arm tight about her waist and, pressed together, they disappeared into the darkness.

CHAPTER 8

The next day, the news of Boryna and Jagna's betrothal burst upon the village of Lipce.

The Voyt was marriage broker – so his wife, since her husband had strictly forbidden her to breathe a word before his return, held back until after noon before running to her neighbour, ostensibly to borrow salt, but on leaving could not help herself, and taking her friend aside she whispered:

'Did you know, Boryna has sent the vodka round to Jagna! But don't tell – my husband's forbidden it.'

'Never! Would I run about the village tongue-wagging! Am I a gossip or what? ... An old goat like that and he's after a third woman! What will his children have to say! Oh my days, oh my days!' she groaned in horror.

As soon as the Voyt's wife was gone, she changed into her striped apron and quickly shot across the orchard to the Kłąbs who lived nearby, to borrow a flax brush since she'd mislaid her own somewhere.

'Have you heard? Boryna is marrying Jagna Dominikówna!¹ They've just been round to hers with the vodka.'

'No! What tales are these! With his children grown and him on in years!'

'He's not young, aye, but they'll not refuse him ... no, a farmer like that, a rich man!'

'And that Jagna! Did you ever! Traipsing about with one then t'other, and now she's to be first farmer's wife in the village! Is there no justice in the world? Eh? And so many lasses unwed there are ... my nieces, for one ...'

'And my brother's! And the Koprzywianek girls! And Nastusia! And more besides! Are they not farmers' daughters? Nor bonny? Nor good-natured? Eh?'

'Won't she lord it now! She's already like that there peacock with her airs.'

'It won't pass without offence to God, it will not – the blacksmith and the other children won't step aside for a stepmother, oh no!'

'Ha, what say have they got? It's the old man's land, so his will goes.'

'Aye, by law, but the children have their rights too.'

'Justice, m'dear, is for them that can afford it ...'

They complained away, lamented over the world and all its doings, and parted, and with them the news spread throughout the entire village.

Since there was little work and none of it urgent, and people were stuck inside as the roads were reduced to mire, the betrothal was the talk of every cottage. The whole village seethed with curiosity as to what would happen. They thoroughly expected fights to arise, court cases, all manner of goings-on. Why, Boryna's truculence was common knowledge. Once he'd dug in his heels, he wouldn't submit even to the priest, and Antek's pride was well known too.

Even those summoned to fix the burst dykes beyond the mill stopped to mull over the event. First one said his piece and then another, until finally old Kłęb, who was a clever man and well respected, said grimly:

'Misfortune will come of it for the whole village, mark my words.'

'Antek won't back down – why would he? Another mouth at the trough,' someone said.

'Don't be stupid, there's enough at Boryna's for five – it's a matter of inheritance.'

'There'll have to be a marriage settlement.'

'Dominikowa's no fool, she'll fix everyone.'

'She's a mother – it's her God-given right to stand by her child,' Kłęb threw in.

'Always at church, but shrewd as a Jew for groszy.'

'Watch your tongue don't shrivel, blathering any old thing about folk.'

And so the betrothal kept the village occupied the whole afternoon, and no wonder, for the Borynas were old farmers who'd long hailed from these parts, and Maciej, though he held no office, still took first place in the village. After all, he occupied ancient, free peasant lands,² as had his grandfather and great-grandfather before him, he had wits and wealth, so that, like it or not, all heeded and respected him.

Only his children and the blacksmith were ignorant of the betrothal, but everyone feared to run over with the news, wary of suffering the brunt of their immediate anger.

So all was quiet at Boryna's cottage, even quieter than usual today. The rain had ceased and the sky had been clearing since morning, so right after breakfast Antek, Kuba and the women went off to the forest to gather brushwood for the fire and see if there were pine needles to be raked up.³

The old man stayed at home.

He'd been strangely disagreeable from daybreak, strangely irked and almost seeking an excuse to relieve the ire and unease that were agitating him: he thrashed Witek because he hadn't tossed straw to the cows, leaving them lying with their flanks half in dung, and he quarrelled with Antek; he shouted at Hanka because her boy had crawled out in front of the house and was smeared in mud; he even set upon Józka for dawdling ... keeping the horses waiting.

When at last he was alone, with only Jagustynka, who had stayed over from the day before to look after the livestock, why, he hardly knew what to do with himself. He constantly went over what Ambrozy had told him of his reception at Dominikowa's, what Jagna had said, but still he felt unsure of himself. As for confidence in that beggar who'd do anything for a drink, he had none. So he prowled about the chamber, looking at the empty road through the window or peering anxiously at Jagna's cottage from the porch, and waited for dusk as on divine mercy.

A hundred times, he wanted to run to the Voyt to urge him to hurry, but he stayed at home, restrained by Jagustynka's eyes always following him, squinting, mocking eyes, gleaming with derision.

'That witch, dammit – eyes like gimlets!' he thought.

Meanwhile, Jagustynka shambled about the house and yard, her distaff under her arm, and poked about. She spun till the spindle rattled in the air, then she wound the thread and carried on, checking the geese, pigs and byre, with Łapa, sleepy and sluggish, at her side. She did not address the old man, though she knew very well what was upsetting him and making him morose, what was agitating him so much that finally he set about hammering in the stakes around the house for the winter lagging.

She'd pause beside him now and then, until at last she commented:

'Work's not going well today.'

'That it isn't, dammit.'

'My Jesus, it's going to be Sodom here! Sodom!'⁴ she thought, retreating. 'It's a good thing the old man's marrying, a good thing! Or the kids'd see to his old age as mine did for me! A whole ten morgen of the best land I gave 'em, pure gold, and what?' She spat in anger. 'I'm forced out to earn, to being a servant! Somebody's hired hand ...'

And the old man, since he could stand it no more, hurled the axe to the ground and shouted:

'To the dogs with such work!'

'Something's eating you inside.'

'It is, it is.'

Jagustynka settled down on the earth bench,⁵ drew out a long thread, wound it on to the spindle and said quietly and a little apprehensively:

'You've nothing to be troubled or agitated about.'

'Oh, you think so?'

'Never you fear; Dominikowa's wise and Jagna has sense too.'

'You don't say!' he cried, delighted, and sat down nearby.

'I've eyes in my head.'

There was a long pause, both holding back in silence.

'Invite me to the wedding and I'll sing you a hop-song'⁶ such that nine months hence you'll be holding a christening,' she began drily, but seeing the old man's face had clouded, she added in a different tone: 'You do well, Maciej, you do. When mine died, if I'd found another husband, I'd not be lodging with others today, oh no. Stupid I was, trusted my children, let them pension me off, signed over the plot, and to what end?'

'I'll not sign over a single field!' he said firmly.

'You're right to say so, you are! I trailed about the courts and what few zlotys I had gone, and bought me no justice ... and now in old age I'm neglected, put out to work! You scum, may you die in a ditch for my wrongs! I went round there on Sunday, just to look at the old place, the orchard whose trees I myself had grafted: my daughter-in-law starts yapping that I've come to spy! Dear Jesus! To spy when I'm come to my own native earth! I thought I'd drop down right there, such a grief seized hold of me! I went to the priest, so he'd at least scold 'em from the pulpit, and he says to me that Jesus'll reward me for my wrongs! Aye, aye ... when someone's got nothing, then Jesus' mercy is good enough for them ... but I'd prefer to farm here on my own land, to sleep in a warm room under a quilt, eat my fill of butter and fat and make merry a little ...'

She began to protest at everything so vehemently that Boryna got up and headed for the Voyt's in the village, as it was beginning to darken.

'You're off soon, eh?' he said to the Voyt.

'Any minute – Szymon's due back now.'

The Soltys soon arrived and off they went together to the inn for a quick glass and to pick up some arak to take along. Ambrozy was there already and promptly joined them, but they didn't sit drinking long, for Maciej was urging them to make haste.

'I'll wait for you here; if they take a drink, then fetch the women and come back quick as a breath,' he called after them.

They sent the mud flying as they marched down the middle of the road. The twilight deepened, strewing the world with hanks of dreary grey yarn into which the whole village disappeared; only here and there did a cottage light begin to glimmer, while the dogs barked in the farmyards as usual before supper.

'Know what, my friend?' the Voyt piped up.

'Eh?'

'I'm thinking Boryna will hold a mighty fine wedding.'

'Maybe he will and maybe he won't!' came the surly reply, since the other was a curmudgeon.

'Oh, he will! I, the Voyt, say so, so'd you better believe it. Mark my words. We'll make such a match of it, oh ho!'

'If the mare'll be ridden, for seems to me the stallion's got hemp in his tail!'

'No business of ours.'

'Ha ... the children'll curse us ...'

'It'll be grand. I, the Voyt, say so.'

They were soon at Dominikowa's cottage.

It was light in the chamber, swept and clean – they were expected after all.

The marriage brokers praised God, greeting each person in turn, including the boys, who were there too, then seated themselves on stools pushed before the hearth and chatted of this and that.

'A cold snap – it's looking like frost,' began the Voyt, warming his hands.

'Well, it's not spring on the way, so no surprise!'

'Have you brought in all your cabbages?'

'Eh ... there's a few back at the patch, but you can't get there now,' the old woman answered calmly, following Jagna with her eyes. The girl was by the window, spooling thread into skeins on a reel, and looked so lovely today that the Voyt, a young man yet, glanced at her with greedy eyes – until finally he began:

'Since it's blustering, muddy and dark, Szymon and me have stepped in at yours on the way. You've welcomed us kindly, Mother, so maybe we could settle some other business between us ...'

'There's always business to be done in the world, if a bargain can be found ...'

'True, Mother, but there's no need for us to hunt, for we're thinking the best is to be found with you.'

'Make us an offer,' she cried merrily.

'Well then, a heifer, for example.'

'Oh ho! That'll cost a pretty penny; she won't be led on any old rope!'

'We've a cord of consecrated silver of a kind even a dragon cannot break ... Well, Mother, how much?' And he began to draw the bottle from his pocket.

'How much? Hard to say! She's young yet, her nineteenth spring but on the way, good and hard-working – she could stay at her mother's side a few years more ...'

'That's a barren stay – with no offspring, barren ...'

'For some that's no difficulty, even at a mother's side!' Szymon whispered.

The Voyt laughed loudly, but the old woman only flashed her eyes and said quickly:

'Find another, mine can wait.'

'Aye, she can, but we don't know a greater beauty nor a better mother!'

'You don't say!'

'I, the Voyt, say it, so mark my words.' Pulling out a glass from his pocket, he wiped it with a corner of his capote, filled it with arak and said solemnly: 'Listen carefully, Dominikowa, to what I have to say; I am an official and my word is not a bird that peeps and cheeps and is gone in a flash! And Szymon, too, you know – no rover he, but a farmer, a father of children and our Soltys!

Mark you what manner of people have come to you and why – mark you!

'Indeed I know it, Piotr, and I mark it.'

'You're a wise woman, so you know too that sooner or later Jagna must go from this house to her own, as the Lord Jesus ordered it, for fathers raise children for the world not for themselves.'

'Oi, true, true, and as for us mothers:

*'Pamper, comb and guard
And more still you must pay
When someone takes 'em away ...'*

'That's how it is in the world and there's no changing it. So, will we take a drop, Mother?'

'Well, how do I know? I won't keep her prisoner. So, Jagna: will you drink?'

'Eh ... I don't know,' she piped, turning her reddening face to the window.

'Duteous she is! A meek calf gets to suckle more than one mother ...' Szymon added gravely.

'It's in your hands, Mother!'

'Drink and bless you, but you've not said who it is,' she said, since it was not done to know ahead of the brokers.

'Who? Why, Boryna himself!' he exclaimed, tilting the glass.

'An old man! A widower!' she parried, as if disappointed.

'Old! Don't offend the good God! Old – when he was at court not long past, over fathering a child!'

'True, but it weren't his.'

'Why, would a farmer like that go with just any woman! Drink up, Mother ...'

'Maybe, maybe, but a widower all the same, and an old man who'll be heading to Abraham's bosom for his beer, and then what? The children will turn out the stepmother and ...'

'Maciej has said there must be a marriage settlement,' Szymon muttered.

'Before the wedding, I'd hope!'

The brokers were silent. After a short while, the Voyt poured a glass and turned to Jagna.

'Drink up, Jagna, come on! We're proposing a man strong as an oak. You'll be mistress of a house, first in the whole village. It's in your hands, Jagna, don't be bashful ...'

She hesitated, blushing, and turned to the wall, but in the end, covering her face with her apron, she drank a little and dashed the rest to the floor ...

Then the glass was passed round to each by turn. The old woman offered bread and salt and finally dried smoked sausage to bite on.

They downed a few more in turn, until everyone's eyes shone and their tongues were loosened. Only Jagna ran off to the storeroom, because for some reason she'd been seized by a fit of crying, until her sobbing could be heard beyond the wall.

The old woman wanted to rush to her, but the Voyt held her back.

'A calf bleats too when they take it from its mother – it's the usual way. She's not going far or to some other village; you'll have much joy of her yet. She will come to no harm. I, the Voyt, say so, trust me ...'

'Aye ... I always thought I'd see grandchildren to console me ...'

'Don't fret, the first will be here before harvest begins ...'

'Only the Lord Jesus can know that, not us sinners! We've had a glass to be sure, but somehow my heart is sorrowful as at a burial ...'

'And no wonder, the one daughter at home, you're missing her already ... Another drop, for the grief! You know what: let's all go to the inn, for I'm out of vodka, and the groom's sitting waiting there on hot coals!'

'We're going to toast the betrothal in an inn?'

'In the old way, as our fathers did. I, the Voyt, say so; trust me.'

The women quickly changed into more festive clothes and soon they went out.

'And are the boys staying behind? A sister's betrothal should bring them cheer too,' said the Voyt, noticing the lads' mournful faces and their anxious looks at their mother.

'We cannot be leaving the house to divine Providence.'

'Call for Agata at the Kłabs', she'll watch it.'

'Agata's left to go begging already. We'll call someone along the way. Come, Jędrzych, and you, Szymek, take your capotes; do you want to go out like beggars? And if anyone gets drunk, he'll remember it. The cows have not yet been seen to and the potatoes need mashing for the pigs, mind.'

'We'll do it, Mother, we'll do it,' they whispered timidly. Though they were great grown boys reaching the beams and broad as pear trees on the baulks, they obeyed their mother like a pair of youngsters, for she held them in an iron grip and, if need be, would mount a stool to grab their mops and smack their faces; there had to be obedience and respect.

They went to the inn.

The night was pitch-black, as usual in the autumn bluster. The wind blew overhead and battered the treetops so that they swayed noisily and almost slumped upon the fences; the pond stormed and tossed, splashing foam into the middle of the road and splattering the faces of the passers-by.

It was gloomy at the inn too, and the wind blew in through a broken windowpane, setting the lamp that hung on a cord behind the bar swinging like a golden flower.

Boryna rushed to greet, and kiss, and hug them warmly since he guessed that Jagna was as good as his.

'And the Lord Jesus said: "Take thou a woman, you worm, so that you, wretch, should not be miserable alone. Amen!"' slurred Ambrozy, for, given he'd been drinking for over an hour, neither his feet nor his tongue was steady.

The Jew quickly set arak and sweet and flavoured vodkas on the bar, and then herring, saffron cake and fancy poppy seed rolls.

'Drink, dear people, eat brothers, faithful Christians!' Ambrozy urged. 'I had a wife once, though I cannot quite remember where ... I'm thinking France ... no, Italy it was, no ... but

abandoned I am now, I tell you ... and the major shouts: "Close ranks!"'²

'Drink up, people! Piotr, you begin!' Boryna interrupted, bringing out a zloty's worth of caramels and thrusting them into Jagna's hands. 'Here you are, Jagna, sweet as sweet they are – here.'

'Ha ... so costly they are,' she said, recoiling.

'Never fear ... I can afford 'em, you'll soon see ... here ... I'd hunt down bird's milk itself for you ... You'll not suffer the lack of anything with me ...' He began to put an arm about her, urging her to drink and eat. Cool and indifferent, Jagna accepted everything calmly, as though it were not at all the day of her betrothal. She wondered if the old man would give her the beads he'd mentioned at the fair before the wedding.

They got down to the drinking, one glass after another, alternating arak and sweet vodka, and all began to talk at once. Even Dominikowa got a little tipsy and set about arguing this and declaiming that until the Voyt himself was impressed at how sage the woman seemed.

The sons too got drunk, for first Ambrozy and then the Voyt kept toasting and egging them on.

'Drink up, boys, drink up, Jagna's betrothal, drink up ...'

'We are, we are,' they replied together, and wanted to kiss Ambrozy's hand, until at last Dominikowa drew Boryna aside to the window and said point blank:

'Jagna's yours, Maciej, yours.'

'God bless you, Mother, for your daughter.' He clasped her about the neck and kissed her.

'You promised to make a marriage settlement, eh?'

'A settlement! Why a settlement? What's mine is hers ...'

'Ha! So that she can look her stepchildren boldly in the eye and they don't curse her.'

'They can keep their hands off! Everything is mine and so Jagusia's too.'

'God bless you, but mark also that you are a little old, and everyone is mortal, for:

*'Death is not choosy:
Today a man, tomorrow a sheep,
With equal scrutiny she'll reap.'*

'I'm strong; I'll hold out another twenty years, never you fear!'

'And Fearless was eaten by wolves.'

'I'm so happy, just tell me what you want. You want me to sign over the three morgen near the Łukasz land?'

'A fly's tasty to a hungry dog – but we're not hungry. Jagna will get five morgen and one of woodland after her father ... settle six on her. The six by the road, where you had the potatoes in summer.'

'My best fields!'

'Like Jagusia's some leftover scrap and not the pick of the village!'

'Of course, that's why I sent the matchmakers, but for heaven's sake, six morgen, that's a chunk of land, a whole farm. What'll the children have to say!' He began to scratch his head, for his heart had contracted; why so many fields, the best land!

'My dear fellow, you're wise enough: think and you'll see that the settlement's but a security for the girl. None will take that land from you while you're living – and what is Jagna's is due to her in fairness from her father, and come spring we'll get the surveyor and it'll be yours and you can sow there immediately ... Mark, it's no odds to you to settle the six on her.'

'Aye, I'll sign it over for Jagna ...'

'When?'

'Tomorrow, why not! No, on Saturday we'll post the banns and then go straight to town. What the heck, a goat dies but once!'

'Come here, Jagna, here!' she called to the girl, to whom the Voyt was holding forth and pressing against the bar, making her laugh out loud.

'Jagna, Maciej is signing over the six morgen by the road to you,' she said.

'God bless you,' Jagna whispered, stretching out her hand to him.

'Let's drink to sweetest Jagna ...'

They drank, and Maciej put his arm about her and led her towards the throng, but she slipped away from him and went to join her brothers, with whom Ambrozy was chatting and drinking.

The hubbub inside the inn grew louder and louder and more people arrived, for one looked in on hearing voices, and another for the chance of a free drink; even the old blind beggar led by the dog turned up and sat in a prominent place, listening and repeating a prayer aloud until Dominikowa herself heard and gave him a vodka, a bite to eat and a couple of kopecks in his hand.

They drank away, all talking at once, wrestling, hugging and kissing, brothers and best friends every last one, the usual way when drink is plentiful.

Only the Jew bustled quietly about, setting down a constant supply of quarts of vodka and bottles of beer and chalking up on the door who was standing what.

Beside himself with joy, Boryna drank, urged and invited, chattering more than anyone had ever heard him. He was forever turning to Jagna, whispering sweet nothings, stroking her pretty face, since it would break custom to take her about the neck and kiss her in front of everyone, and while he could hardly withstand the powerful urge to do so, he just seized her about the waist and pulled her into a dark corner.

Dominikowa swiftly concluded that it was time to go home and began to call her sons to bestir themselves.

But Szymek was so drunk that he simply adjusted his belt in response to his mother's words, pounded his fist on the table and shouted:

'I'm a farmer, son-of-a-bitch! ... Who wants, can go ... I want to drink, so I will ... Jew! Vodka!'

'Quiet, Szymek, quiet, or you'll get it!' Jędrzych whined tearfully, dead drunk too, and pulled his brother by the capote.

'Home, boys! Now!' Dominikowa hissed threateningly.

'A farmer, I am! I'll stay if I want, and drink if I want ... that's enough of mother's rule ... and if not ... out with her ... son-of-a-bitch ...'

But the old woman merely thumped him on the chest so that he reeled and suddenly came to. Jędrzych rammed on his cap and led him outside, but the fresh air clearly confused him, for after a few paces, he stumbled, grabbed the fence and began shouting and muttering:

'A farmer I am, son-of-a-bitch ... it's my land ... I'm in charge ... I'll have vodka ... Jew, arak! Or ... I'll boot you out ...'

'Szymek! God's sake, Szymek, come on home – Ma's coming!' moaned Jędrzych, in tears.

The old woman and Jagna caught up with them shortly and she gathered her sons from under the fence where they were close to wrestling and rolling in the mud.

Back in the inn, it had quietened after the women's departure. People were slowly dispersing and only Boryna remained with his matchmakers, Ambrozy and the old beggar, who was now drinking with the best of them.

Ambrozy was befuddled. He stood in the middle of the room, crooning or spinning tales: 'Black he were ... black as teak ... he aims at me ... no chance ... I stick my bayonet in his belly ... twist till it crunches ... one down! ... We're waiting, waiting ... and here's the commander ... Jesus Christ! Commander himself! ... "Boys," he says ... "People," he says ... "Fall in ... Fall in ..."' he shouted in a great voice, drawing himself up and moving off slowly, so that his wooden leg tapped on the floor. 'Drink to me, Piotr, drink ... poor wretch that I am ...' he babbled by the wall, but suddenly, without waiting for the toast, he bolted outside and only his husky voice reached them, singing, from the road ...

Then the miller entered the inn, a huge fellow, dressed in city style, with a red face, grey hair and small, sharp eyes.

'You're drinking, friends! Ho, ho, the Voyt, Soltys and Boryna! A wedding or what!'

'What else? Have a drink with us, miller, come on,' Boryna proposed. And they had another round.

'If that's how it is, I'll tell you some news that'll sober you up.'

They stared at him with addled eyes.

'Squire's sold the wood at Wolf's Hollow, not an hour since!'

'That scoundrel, the dog! Sold! Sold our wood!' Boryna yelled and hurled a bottle to the ground in a frenzy.

'Sold it! The law's meant for the squire too, for everyone, the law is,' drunken Szymon spluttered.

'Rubbish! I, the Voyt, say it's rubbish, so trust me!'

'Sold, only we won't let them take it, as God's in heaven we will not!' cried Boryna and thumped the table with his fist ...

The miller left while they sat far into the night, deliberating and hurling threats at the manor.

CHAPTER 9

It was a few days after Jagna's betrothal.

The rains had stopped, the roads had drained and hardened, and the waters flowed away, so that murky ash-grey puddles lingered only in the furrows and here and there on the lowlands or riverside meadows, like tear-filled eyes.

All Souls' Day¹ had come, grey, sunless and lifeless, with not even a wind to rummage among shrivelled stalks or rock the trees bent low towards the ground ... A dull and painful silence engulfed the world.

In Lipce, the bells had been pealing slowly and constantly since morning, the dismal, aching sound moaning across the deserted misty fields, calling out in a sombre voice of mourning on this dreary day, a day that had risen pale, wreathed in mists stretching far into the sunken distance to the faraway edges of earth and sky, livid as a fathomless gulf.

A flock of crows and jackdaws began to drift from beneath the bruised clouds in the east where the sun was still rising, glowing faintly like cooling copper ...

They flew high, high above, barely discernible to the eye, their wild, plaintive riot of cawing barely audible to the ear, like the groan of autumn nights ...

And still the bells tolled.

A doleful hymn rolled heavily upon the desolate, bleak air, subsiding with sobs on to the fields, echoing its sorrows throughout woods and villages, flowing over the whole world, so that people and fields and villages seemed like one great heart beating in mournful lament ...

Still the birds kept coming overhead, a fearful wonder to behold, flying ever lower, in ever-greater flocks, as though the sky were spattered with soot, and the dull rustling of wings and cawing intensified, grew and hummed like a gathering storm ... They circled above the village and wheeled about the fields like a heap of leaves snatched up by a gale, swooping down on the forest, hanging from the bare poplars and settling upon the lindens by the church, on the trees at the graveyard, the orchards, the ridges of the cottage roofs, and even the fences ... until, alarmed at the ceaseless pealing of the bells, they rose in a black cloud and flew off to the woods ... a high piercing sound trailing in their wake.

'A hard winter's coming!' people said.

'Heading for the forest, snow's sure to fall soon.'

More and more folk came out from their cottages, for never had so many birds been seen together. They gazed at them for a long while, with a strange melancholy, until the birds disappeared into the forest. They gazed, sighing heavily, some making the sign of the cross on their foreheads to stave off evil, and began to dress for church and leave, for the bells were still lamenting, and people from other villages were already arriving on the lanes and looming through the mist along the paths and tracks.

A poignant sadness fell upon every soul; a strange and painful silence enfolded every heart – the quiet mournful recollection and memories of those who'd gone before, under those drooping birches, those black, slanting crosses ...

'Ah, dear Jesus! Dear Jesus!' they would sigh and, lifting faces grey as the earth, gazed now with fearless eyes into the mystery, before calmly going to say their prayers and make their offerings for the dead.

The village lay submerged in heavy doleful silence. Only the plangent, suppliant chanting of beggars by the church could be heard from time to time.

At Boryna's too it was quieter than usual, although inside there lurked a hidden hell, ready to erupt at any moment ...

For the children now knew everything.

And yesterday, Sunday, the first banns had been put up for Jagna and the old man.

On Saturday, they'd ridden to town, where Boryna signed over six morgen to Jagna at the notary's.

He came back late with a face full of scratches, for, being a little drunk, he would have liked to take Jagna right there in the cart, but all he took was what came with a fist and sharp fingernails.

Back in the house, he'd spoken to no one, though Antek was never out of sight, but went straight to bed just as he was, in his boots and sheepskin ... In the morning, Józia went about muttering that he'd smeared the quilt with mud.

'Hush, Józia, hush! It happens, even when a body's never touched a drop ...' he said cheerfully and went off first thing to Jagna's. He sat there until late, so that they waited at home for him in vain with dinner and supper.

Today Boryna got up late, well after sunrise, put on his best capote, ordered Witek to grease his Sunday boots and cut him new wads of straw² Kuba shaved him, and he wound his sash about him,³ pulled on his hat, glancing impatiently through the window at Hanka on the porch, picking lice from the boy's hair, as he didn't want to run into her, until he saw that she'd gone inside for a moment, then he slipped through the yard and they saw no more of him that day ...

Józka had been crying and knocking about the cottage for days, like a caged bird! Antek, meanwhile, smouldered in torments that grew increasingly painful and acute. He neither slept, nor ate, nor managed to occupy himself with anything. Still stunned and completely stupefied, he hardly knew what was happening. His face darkened, making his eyes look even bigger and seeming to blaze as though glossy with petrified tears. Gritting his teeth so as not to cry out loud or curse, he paced constantly about the room or the yard, around the farmstead, or out to the road and back. He'd slump on to the porch bench and sit there for hours at a time, staring into space and sunk in the pain that continued to grow and intensify in him.

The house was subdued, with weeping, moans and sighs the only sounds, as after a burial. The doors to the byre and sties stood wide open, so that livestock wandered about the garden and looked in at the windows and there was no one to herd them back in but old Łapa, who barked and chased in vain – he could not manage it.

In the stable, Kuba was cleaning his shotgun on his pallet, while Witek looked on in solemn awe, peeking out of the window in case anyone approached.

'It boomed so loud, Jesus! I thought the squire or woodsman were shooting.'

'Ha ... aye ... it's a long time since I did some shooting. I packed it hard and it thundered like a cannon ...'

'Did you go first thing in the evening?'

'Aye, over to the manor side, by the forest – the deer like to come out there for the winter wheat ... It were dark, so I sat a long time ... until at dawn a stag comes along ... I hunkered down only five paces off ... I didn't shoot, for he were huge as a bull. I won't manage him, I thought ... so I let him go ... and in a prayer or two out come the hinds ... I picked out the best ... aimed ... and didn't it boom! I'd packed it so hard, bah, my shoulder swelled from the rebound ... but down she went ... just kicked her legs ... still not gone ... she'd got half a handful of pellets in her side ... and she bleated, bugged it ... so's I were scared the woodsman'd hear and I had to finish her off ...'

'And is she left back in the woods, eh?' the boy asked, excited by the tale.

'She's left where's she's left, no business o' yourn, and a word to anyone and you'll see what you'll get.'

'I won't tell if you say not – what about to Józia?'

'Ha, the whole village'd know straight off. Here's ten groszy, buy yourself something ...'

'I wouldn't tell anyroad, but take me along, dear, dear Kuba ...'

'Breakfast!' Józia was shouting from the house.

'Just keep mum, and I'll take you!'

'And will you let me shoot the once, will you? Eh?' he begged.

'Ha, you think gunpowder comes free, eh?'

'I've got some money, Kuba, I have. The master gave me two zloty at the fair that I'm putting by for the dead souls at the listing ...'⁴

'All right, all right, I'll teach you,' he whispered and stroked the boy's head, his heart won by all this pleading.

After breakfast, in the space of a few prayers, both were headed for church. Kuba hobbled along rapidly, but Witek dragged his feet a bit, downcast that he had no shoes and had to go barefoot.

'Are you allowed in the sacristy with no shoes, eh?' he asked quietly.

'You daft 'un! As if the Lord Jesus looks at folk's shoes and not their prayers ...'

'For sure, but it's always more decent in boots,' he whispered sadly.

'You'll buy yourself some yet, you will ...'

'I will, Kuba, I will. Soon as I'm big enough to be a farmhand, I'll be off to Warsaw and get a place with horses ... And in town everyone wears boots, ain't that true, Kuba?'

'True, true! You remember that still?'

'Right well! I were five when Koziol's wife brought me, I remember⁵ ... aye, there were a frost ... we went on foot to catch the train ... I remember ... and so many lights glowing ... my eyes are still dazzled ... I remember ... and house beside house and big as churches ...'

'You're blathering!' Kuba scoffed.

'I remember, Kuba ... I couldn't see the roofs after all ... and so many coaches ... and windows right to the ground ... aye ... I could see whole walls of glass ... and bells pealing the whole time ...'

'No wonder, with that many churches!'

'Surely, where else could it be coming from?'

They fell silent, for they'd reached the graveyard and were pushing through the dense crowd clustered around the church as there was no room left inside.

The beggars lined the path on either side from the main doors right to the road, each exhorting and crying out in their own way, praying aloud and begging for alms. Some played on their fiddles, singing hymns in plangent voices, and others on pipes and harmonicas, creating such an uproar it was agony to the ears.

The sacristy too was crammed, so that people's ribs cracked against the table where the organist was taking the offerings and at the other, manned by his son Jaś, the one who went away to school.

Kuba squeezed to the front and recited a tidy litany of names to the organist, who wrote them down. He would take six groszy a soul, or three eggs if someone had no cash.

Witek, who'd been lagging behind a little as folk trod on his bare feet, pushed forward as best he could, clutching his money in his fist, despite frequent grunts that he'd jostled someone's elbow or was supplanting his elders, but when he'd reached the organist's table he was completely tongue-tied ... Why, it was all farmers and farmers' wives, nigh on the whole village, for here was the miller's wife in a hat like a squire's lady, and the blacksmith and his wife and the Voyt with his ... and all of them looking at him ... and listening ... They were listing souls aloud ... ten at a time ... twenty names they gave ... whole families ... fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers ... And what of him? ... Did he know who his mother was? His father? ... Did he? ... Did he have someone to give his offering for? ... My Jesus! Dearest Jesus ... and he could only open his mouth and his blue eyes wide and stand motionless as a fool, and his heart shrank with the pain of it so that he barely gasped, could barely catch his breath ... and he felt so sick deep down inside, as though about to take his last breath ... But he didn't stand there long, as they shoved him back into a corner, under the stoup, where he could only lean his head against the pewter basin to keep from keeling over and the tears trickled like beads from his eyes ... like a sorrowful rosary ... which he wanted to hold back ... but in vain ... and he trembled so hard that every bone in his body shook and he could neither grit his teeth nor stand straight; he crouched on the floor in the corner, out of sight, and cried heartfelt orphan's tears ...

'*Matulu! Matulu!*'⁶ something whimpered inside, tearing his soul to shreds. And he could not fathom nor discern why everyone had fathers, had mothers, while he alone was an orphan, he alone, only him ...

'Jesus, my Jesus!' he sobbed, overwhelmed like a bird suffocating in a snare, until Kuba found him and called:

'Witek, have you sorted the prayers?'

'No,' he replied. Leaping up suddenly, he wiped his eyes and forced his way back to the table ... Yes, he too would offer his names ... How would they know he had no one ... Why ... him an orphan, it was his to know ... so what if he was a founding ... With a spirited look, he confidently gave the names: Józef, Marianna and Antoni, the first that came to mind ...

Then he handed over his money, took the change and went with Kuba to the church to pray and listen for the priest to list his souls ...

A catafalque with a coffin stood in the centre of the church,⁷ surrounded by blazing candles, and from the pulpit the priest recited an endless litany of names. Whenever he paused, a loud response echoed from all those present, praying for the dead still left in purgatory.

Witek knelt down by Kuba, who pulled a chaplet from his bosom and began reciting the Hail Mary and 'I believe ...' repeatedly, as the priest had directed. Witek too said one prayer, then another, but overcome in the end by the monotonous chanting and the warmth and exhausted by crying, he leaned slightly against Kuba's hip and fell asleep ...

That afternoon, everyone from Boryna's came for vespers, which were held at the graveyard chapel once a year.

There was Antek with his wife and children, the blacksmith and family, Józka and Jagustynka, and Kuba came hobbling after with Witek – all come to make a proper day of it.

The day was already closing its tired grey eyes, fading and sinking slowly into the ominous sad depths of dusk; the wind picked up and skimmed the fields with a mournful sighing, buffeting the trees and ushering in the chilly mouldering breath of autumn.

It was quiet – that strange dismal quietness of All Souls' Day. People thronged the road in solemn silence, and only the dull tramping of feet could be heard, along with the fitful swaying of the roadside trees and the quiet aching murmur of branches trembling overhead, while the playing and suppliant singing of the beggars rose, sobbing, in the air and subsided without an echo ...

At the gates, and even among the graves against the wall, stood rows of salt barrels,⁸ groups of beggars sprawling beside them.

Under the poplars, people were streaming along the road, all the way to the graveyard; in the grey ash of dusk, the candles held by some folk flickered and yellow flames swayed in their oil lamps. On entering the graveyard, each person would pull some bread from a bundle, or a piece of cheese, a bit of bacon or sausage, a skein of yarn or a handful of combed flax, or a string of mushrooms, and all these they placed piously in the barrels – some for the priest, some for the organist or Ambrozy, and the rest for the beggars – and those who put in nothing would press a coin into a beggar's hand ... and whisper the names of the dead for whom they were asking for intercession ...

A chorus of prayers, hymns and the rhythmic chanting of names droned ceaselessly as people passed through the gates. They kept on going, dispersing among the graves, and soon little lights began to shine like glow-worms, glimmering through the shadows and thickets of trees and dry grass.

The quiet, muffled whisper of prayers quavered in the earthbound silence. Sometimes a painful sob would start up from among the graves; sometimes a forlorn lament would swerve and wind heart-rendingly between the crosses; or a sudden brief cry, swollen with grief, would rive the air like a thunderbolt, or the quiet tears of children, the weeping of poor waifs, would be heard, like the piping of fledgling birds in the shadowy thickets.

At times, a heavy hollow silence descended on the graveyard, so that only the sombre murmuring of trees and the echo of human sobbing, lamentation and bitter cries rose to the heavens, and spread out into the wide world ...

People drifted in silence between the graves, whispering timidly and peering fearfully into the dim unfathomable distance ...

'Everyone dies!' they acknowledged, sighing deeply with stony resignation, and wandered on, to perch by their fathers' graves, recite prayers or sit quietly, lost in thought, oblivious to life, oblivious to death, oblivious to pain – like the trees, and like the trees their souls would sway in a dream-like sense of trepidation ...

'My Jesus! Merciful Lord, Mary!' they exclaimed, the words bursting from their weary troubled souls, and they raised their set faces, spent as the sacred earth, and their grey eyes like the puddles, still silver in the murk. Hanging on to the crosses and swaying sleepily, like the trees, they shifted to their knees; they cast their anxious hearts at Christ's feet and burst into tears of resignation and submission.

Kuba and Witek went along with the rest, and when it was completely dark, Kuba made his way deep into the old cemetery.

It was quiet there among the sunken graves, empty and gloomy. There lay the forgotten, of whom all memory had long since faded, like all their days and times; only the birds cawed ominously and the thickets rustled sadly. Here and there jutted a crumbling cross – whole clans lay like trophies of the hunt, whole villages, whole generations; no one prayed there now, nor cried, nor lit a lamp.⁹ Only the wind howled through the branches or snatched the last leaves and tossed them into the night to their final perdition ... Only vague voices that were not voices, shadows that were not shadows, battered the naked trees like blinded birds and seemed to whimper for mercy ...

Kuba pulled from his bosom a few chunks of bread he'd saved, tore them into pieces and knelt to scatter them over the graves.

'Take and eat, Christian soul, that I'm remembering in the evening hour. Eat, O human penitent, eat!' he whispered fervently.

'Will them take it?' asked Witek, his voice low and filled with alarm.

'Course! Priest won't feed 'em! The others are filling the barrels, but these poor 'uns get none of it ... The priest and beggarly swine get their grub ... and the penitent souls go hungry ...'

'Will they come?'

'Don't you worry ... all the tormented in purgatory ... all of 'em. The Lord Jesus lets 'em out on earth this day, to visit their own ...'

'To visit their own!' Witek repeated, trembling.

'Don't be afraid, you silly. What was evil has no power today. The litanies for the dead chase 'em off, and the prayers, the lights ... And the Lord Jesus himself walks the earth today, the dear Master counts to see how many souls are left, till he's gathered 'em all up ... I remember my dear mother telling me, and as the old people tell ...'

'The Lord Jesus walks the earth today!' whispered Witek and looked about warily ...

'You'll see nothing ... Only the holy can see, or those badly wronged ...'

'Look – it's shining over there and someone's there!' cried Witek in fright, pointing to a row of graves right by the fence ...

'Them lying there were trounced in the forest ... aye, my kin lie there ... my mother too ... aye.'¹⁰

They scrambled through the thickets and knelt down at the graves, so sunken and razed that barely a trace was left of them. No cross marked them, no tree gave them shade, nothing, only bare sand, a few dried stalks of mullein, and silence, oblivion, death ...

Ambrozy, Jagustynka and old Kłab were kneeling at those graves of the dead. Pressed into the sand, two lamps flickered, the flames swaying in the gusts of wind that snatched away the words of the prayers, bearing them off into the dark night ...

'Aye ... my mother lies there ... I recall ...' Kuba whispered quietly, more to himself than to Witek, who was squatting at his side. The cold had pierced him through and through.

'She were called Magdalena ... My father had his own land, but served as a coachman at the manor ... He'd drive only the old master, with a team o' horses ... and then he died ... My uncles took the land ... and I minded the master's pigs ... Aye, Magdalena were my mother, and my father Pieter, or Socha they nicknamed him, like me ... And then the squire took me for the horses so I could drive the team like my father ... or I'd go hunting yon, to other gentlemen, all the time ... I were not a bad shot ... so the young squire gave me a shotgun ... and Mother kept the old lady company at the manor ... I remember it well ... and when they all went off ... they took me too ... Away a whole year ... I did whatever I were told ... aye, I saw more than one Russki off ... more than two ... and the young squire was hit in the gut ... his innards gushed out ... He were my master ... a good man ... I took him on my shoulders and carried him away ... and then he went off to warm lands and ordered me to take letters back to the old master ... I went ... aye, I were dog-tired ... they'd shot through my leg ... It wouldn't heal, since I were always outside,

under the bare sky ... and snow to your waist and bitter frost ... I remember ... aye ... I dragged myself on by night ... I'm searching ... and Jesus, Mary! It's like someone's clubbed me across the skull! No manor, no barns ... not even fences ... all burnt to the ground ... and the old master, the old mistress, my mother and that Józefka who were a maid ... all lying in the garden, clubbed to death!¹¹ ... Jesus! Jesus! I remember it all ... aye ... Mary!' he moaned quietly. Tears as big as peas ran down his face, so many that he stopped wiping them away and only moaned with grief and longing, it all stood so vividly before his eyes, while Witek slept, poor wretch, for he was exhausted with crying.

The night deepened, the wind tugged harder at the trees, the birches' long braids swept the graves, and their white trunks loomed in the murk as though robed in shrouds ... People began to disperse ... lights were extinguished ... the singing of the beggars faded ... A solemn silence full of strange rustlings and poignant voices descended upon the tombs ... The graveyard seemed to fill with shadows ... a throng of spectres ... clusters of obscure shapes ... with the strains of moaning quiet voices ... an ocean of strange trembling and shifting darkness ... flickers of dread, wordless sobbing ... a mystery full of foreboding and confusion ... until a flock of crows took wing from the chapel roof and flew over the fields with a raucous cry, and all the dogs in Lipce began a long, piteous and desperate howling ...

The village was quiet despite its being a holiday, the roads were empty, the inn was closed and only a few lights flickered here and there through small misted windows. All that could be heard was the sound of quiet pious singing and prayers recited aloud for the dead ...

Folk moved fearfully outside the cottages; they listened fearfully to the murmuring of the trees; fearfully they looked out of the windows to see if something was standing there, if those who wandered on that day had appeared, driven by longing and the will of God ... Were they not moaning penitently at the crossroads, were they not peering in piteously at the windows?

In some places, according to ancient holy custom, the women of the house would set out the remains of supper on the earth benches, cross themselves devoutly and whisper:

'Here you are: eat, Christian soul, waiting still in purgatory ...'

All Souls' evening passed in quiet, sadness, memories and apprehension ...

At Antek's place, Roch, that wanderer from the Holy Land, sat reading and telling pious and holy tales.

There were a fair few people, for Ambrozy had come and Jagustynka and the Kłąbs, Kuba and Witek, Józia and Nastusia; only old Boryna was absent, sitting long into the night at Jagna's.

It was quiet in the chamber but for a cricket chirping behind the hearth and the dry pine roots crackling on the fire.

They all sat on benches round the fireplace; only Antek remained at the window.

Roch raked the coals now and then with a stick and said in a quiet voice:

'It's not terrible to die, no ...

'For as the little birds head for warm lands in the winter, so the weary soul hurries to Jesus ...

'Just as the poor trees stand naked before spring, when the Lord dresses them in green leaves and fragrant blossom, so you, human soul, must look to Jesus for joy, for mirth, for springtime and for that eternal garb ...

'Just as the sun embraces this fertile weary earth, so the Lord will enfold every little soul, so that winter, pain or death are as nothing to them.

'*Hej!* For there is nothing but weeping on this earth, nothing but woe and tribulation!

'And vexations that multiply like yon thistles, and swell into a forest!

'And all is vain and futile – like the dust, like the foam that one wind puffs across the water, while another comes to bear it away.'

CHAPTER 10

'I say it from the pulpit and to each one of you, but still you set upon each other like dogs ...' The wind forced the rest of the priest's words down his throat, making him cough violently. Antek said nothing, but just walked alongside, looking into the shadows between the trees.

The wind grew stronger all the time, crashing about the road, beating and whipping the poplars until they bent with a moan, rustling in outrage.

'I'd said already,' the priest began again, "'Take the mare to the pond yourself,'" but no, he lets her out ahead of him – and now she's lost ... She's blind after all – she'll clamber into the fences somewhere and maybe even break her legs!' he lamented, searching carefully, peering behind every tree, scanning the fields.

'But she always did go by herself ...'

'She knows the road to the pond well ... Anyone could fill her barrel with water, then just turn her about and she'd get back to the presbytery herself ... But they'd harness her in the daytime, whereas today Magda or Walek let her out at dusk ... Walek!' he shouted loudly, for a shadow was looming under the poplars ...

'I saw Walek along our side, but back before twilight.'

'He went off to look for her, but too little too late. The mare's at least twenty years old – I raised her from a filly ... She's earned her daily bread ... devoted as any human being ... My God, if anything bad should befall her!'

'Eh, what can happen!' muttered Antek angrily, for here was he, come to the reverend for advice, to air his sorrows, and not only had he been scolded but dragged off to hunt for a mare! Aye, it was a pity for the mare, though she was both blind and old, but a human being should come first!

'You pull yourself together and no vengefulness, for we're talking of the head of your family! Do you hear!'

'I'm well aware!' he answered angrily.

'It's a mortal sin and offends God. And nothing good comes to one who raises his hand to his father in a passion and opposes the commands of God. You've sense enough to know that.'

'I want only justice.'

'But you're seeking vengeance, eh?'

Antek didn't know what to say to that.

'And I'll tell you another thing: a meek calf suckles more than one mother.'

'So everyone tells me ... aye, I've had it up to the gullet with that meekness. I cannot take any more! A man can be a thug, a wrongdoer, but he's father of a family so he can do as he pleases, and the children are not to claim for the wrongs done to them! Good God, if that's how the world's ordered, there's nothing for it but to spit on it all and go where your eyes may lead you ...'

'Go then, who's stopping you?' the priest exclaimed impulsively.

'Maybe I will – what's there for me here?' he whispered more quietly, almost tearfully.

'Nonsense. Others don't own a single field, and stay and work and thank God for it. Put your back into it and stop complaining like a woman. You're fit and strong, and have something to put your back to ...'

'Oh aye, a whole three morgen,' he threw in mockingly.

'You've a wife and children, you should remember that.'

'Oh, I do,' he muttered through gritted teeth.

They'd reached the inn, where lights shone at the windows and the clamour of voices reached as far as the road.

'What's this, another drunken spree?'

'It's the recruits, the ones they took for the army back in summer, drinking to raise their spirits ... They'll send 'em to the back o' beyond come Sunday, so they're enjoying themselves while they can ...'

'The inn is high on full!' the priest murmured, pausing by the poplars, where a good view was to be had of the whole interior, crammed with people.

'They're meant to meet today and take counsel over yon wood the squire has sold to the Jews for logging ...'¹

'He's not sold it all – there's plenty left!'

'He's not touching a single spruce till he's settled with us!'

'What do you mean?' the priest asked, somewhat alarmed.

'We're not having it, that's what! Father wants to sue, but Kłab and those with him say they don't want no court, but there'll be no felling and the whole village will go out if need be, with axes, pitchforks, whatever's to hand. We'll not give up what's ours ...'

'Jesus, Mary! Then it'll not end without a fight or some other misfortune!'

'Right enough! There'll soon be justice when a few heads from the manor feel the edge of an axe!'

'Antek! Anger's addled your brain, has it? You're talking rubbish, my friend!'

But Antek was not listening. Swerving to one side, he disappeared into the shadows, and the priest hurried off to the presbytery, for he had heard the rumble of wheels and the quiet, forlorn whinny of the mare.

Antek, meanwhile, went down the village towards the mill, and along the other side of the pond, in order not to pass Jagna's house.

She'd stuck in his heart like a splinter, like a rancorous splinter that could be neither pulled out nor ignored.

A bright light shone from her cottage, clear and cheerful somehow ... He stopped for just one look, to curse at least in his anger – but something suddenly snatched him from the spot so that he tore off like a whirlwind, and did not once look back.

'She's Father's now, Father's!'

He ran to his brother-in-law, the blacksmith's, where there was no advice to be gained, but he could at least sit among folk and not be back there, at his father's house ... Or that priest!

Harrying him off to work like that! Ha, did nothing himself, no cares nor worries – easy for him to chide others. Reminding him of the wife and children ... oh, he minded them well enough! He was sick to death of her weeping, her meekness, those whimpering dog's eyes ... If it weren't for her! ... If only he were alone! Jesus! He groaned deeply and a savage mad anger seized him so that he wanted to catch someone by the throat, choke them, tear them apart and beat them to death!

But who? ... No, he didn't know. The anger subsided as suddenly as it had arisen and he stared into the night with an empty gaze, listening to the struggling of the gale as it tumbled about the orchards, whipping the trees until they leaned against the fences and lashed his face with their branches ... He wandered along, slow and so leaden he could barely move, for his soul was beset by the demons of grief, weariness and helplessness, so that he promptly forgot where he was going or why.

'She's Father's. Jagna is Father's!' he declared again and again, ever more quietly, like a prayer, repeated so as not to forget.

Inside the smithy it glowed red with fire. A boy was working the bellows frenziedly until the incandescent coals roared and burst into blood-red flames. The blacksmith stood by the anvil, in a leather apron, his cap pushed to the back of his head, arms bare, his face so grimy that only his eyes showed, glowing like embers. He beat the red iron hard until it rang and a rain of sparks showered from under the hammer and melted with a hiss into the muddy ground.

'What's up?' he asked after a moment.

'What do you think!' Antek replied quietly. He leaned against one of the wagons waiting to be repaired and stared into the fire.

The smith worked on steadily, heating the iron again and again. He beat away, the hammer ringing time, and helped the boy with the bellows when greater heat was needed, glancing furtively at Antek all the while, a malicious smile playing under his red moustache.

'So you've been at the priest's? Well?'

'Well what? Nothing! Would've heard the same in church.'

'What were you expecting?' he said, laughing ironically.

'He's a priest after all, educated ...' Antek said, justifying himself.

'Educated when it's time to take, less so when it's time to give ...'

But Antek had lost the heart to argue. 'I'm off inside,' he said after a moment.

'Go on, the Voyt's dropping by so we'll come in! There's baccy in the cupboard, light up ...'

But his words were lost, as Antek had gone off to the house, on the other side of the road. His sister was lighting the fire and the eldest boy was at the table, learning from a primer ...

They acknowledged each other silently.

'Studying, eh?' he remarked, for the boy was reading out loud falteringly, running a sharpened stick along the letters.

‘The young lady at the mill’s been showing him since potato digging, since my husband has no time.’

‘Roch is teaching too, at my father’s, from yesterday.’

‘I wanted to send Jasiek, but my husband won’t let me since it’s at Father’s and the young lady’s more educated. She were at school in Warsaw ...’

‘For sure, for sure,’ he said, for the sake of saying something.

‘And Jasiek’s that smart with the primer, even the young lady’s surprised.’

‘Oh aye ... blacksmith’s flesh and blood after all, son of such a smart alec ...’

‘You can mock, but he says right that while Father’s living the settlement can always be withdrawn ...’

‘Aye, tear the prey from the wolf’s jaws, go ahead! Six morgen of land! Me and the wife, we work there like farmhands, and he signs it over to any old stranger ...’

‘If you curse and quarrel and go off asking advice and go to the law, it’ll end with him throwing you out the house ...’ she said quietly, looking round at the door.

‘Who says so?’ he cried, leaping up from the stool.

‘Hush ... it’s just what people are saying, hush!’ she whispered timidly.

‘I’ll not give in. Let him chuck me out by force, I’ll go to court, I’ll get the law on it, but I won’t let it go,’ he was almost shouting.

‘You won’t smash a wall with your head, however much you butt it like a ram!’ said the blacksmith, entering the room.

‘What am I to do, then? You’ve got wise advice for everyone, so you tell me ...’

‘Anger’ll get you nowhere with the old man!’

He lit his pipe and began to explain, to set forth, to mollify and prevaricate until the penny suddenly dropped and Antek shouted:

‘You’re on his side!’

‘I’m on the side of justice.’

‘Has he paid you well for it?’

‘If he has, it’s not out of your pocket.’

‘Oh it is, son-of-a-bitch, it is! Hark at him, a benefactor, dammit, from what belongs to others. You’ve taken plenty, so it’s not so urgent for you.’

‘I’ve taken no more than you!’

‘Oh aye, no more – bits and pieces, clothes here, linen there, a cow, all the stuff you’ve wheedled out of Father. I well remember the geese, the piglets, and who knows what else! And the bullock he just gave you, is that nothing?’

‘There was nothing stopping you either.’

‘I’m neither thief nor Gypsy!’

‘And I’m a thief, am I?’

They leapt forward, ready to grab each other by the collar, but soon dropped back, for Antek said more quietly:

‘I’m not saying it at you ... But I won’t give up what’s mine, even if it finishes me ...’

‘Ha ... seems it’s not just the land that’s your problem,’ the smith threw in mockingly.

‘Meaning what?’

‘You were running after Jagna, so now you’re down in the dumps.’

‘Saw me, did you?’ he shouted, struck to the quick.

‘There are some in the village as did, more than once.’

‘Damn their eyes,’ he whispered, but low, as the Voyt was just coming in and greeting everyone. He clearly knew what the quarrel was about, for he too began to defend the old man and justify him.

‘He’s fed you sausage and watered you well, so it’s no wonder you’re defending him ...’ cried Antek.

‘Stop your nonsense, when I, the Voyt, am speaking!’ he shouted haughtily.

‘Your voytship’s as much to me as that broken stick.’

‘What did you say, eh?’

‘You heard! And if not, I’ll say something that’ll really get to you ...’

‘Let’s have it then, come on!’

‘Right then – you’re an old drunk, a Judas and a cheat! What’s more, you make merry on village money and you did very well out o’ the manor when the squire sold our wood! And you can have more, if you want it, with this stick,’ he shouted impetuously, snatching up a cudgel.

‘I hold office, mark you, Antek, before you regret it.’

‘And you’ll not threaten anyone in my house. This ain’t the inn!’ shouted the blacksmith, stepping in front of the Voyt, but Antek, who could not care less by now, swore at them both like they were dogs, slammed the door and left ...

Feeling mightily relieved, he returned home calm, downcast only at having needlessly quarrelled with his brother-in-law.

‘Now everyone will be against me!’ he was thinking next morning at breakfast when, to his amazement, he saw the blacksmith entering the room.

They greeted each other as though nothing had happened.

And since Antek was going out to the barn to chop chaff, the blacksmith followed, settled on one of the bales tossed down for threshing from the haymow and began quietly:

‘The devil take all these quarrels, and over what? Stupid words! So I’ve come to you first, to be first to say let’s shake hands ...’

Antek stretched out his hand, glanced at him suspiciously and muttered:

‘Aye, it were but words, for I’d no anger towards you. The Voyt got to me, but what’s it to him, it’s not his business, he can keep his nose out!’

‘I told him the same. He wanted to run after you.’

‘To fight with me ... I’d give him a fight that would send him to join his cousin, who’s still nursing his ribs from harvest-time ...’ he cried and set about loading straw into the chaff-cutter.²

‘I reminded him,’ the smith threw in coyly with a sly smile.

‘I’ll settle with him yet, he won’t forget me in a hurry ... Mister bigwig official!’

‘He’s just a dunderhead, forget him. I’ve had an idea, that’s why I’ve come ... Here’s what to do ... My wife will come by this afternoon. You and her go to the old man and talk it over properly ... Useless to get angry and moan in corners – you’ve got to stand up and say to his face what’s what ... It might go well, it might not, but it’ll be out in the open!’

‘What’s there to have out when he’s made a settlement already!’

‘Anger’ll not get you anywhere with him! Aye, he’s signed land over, but while he’s living, he can always withdraw – just remember that – and so it’s best not to rile him. Let him marry, let him have his fun.’

Antek blenched at that reminder and felt himself trembling so hard that he paused in his hacking.

‘Don’t oppose him to his face. Praise him, say he’s doing the right thing, and if the settlement’s what he wants ... let him simply promise the rest – mine and yours – with witnesses!’ he added cunningly.

‘And Józka and Grzela?’ Antek asked reluctantly.

‘They’ll get paid off! Hasn’t Grzela had plenty! Why he sends him money to the army almost every month. Listen, just do as I advise and you won’t lose out. I’ll see to it that it’ll all end up ours ...’

‘Ram’s still kicking and furrier’s busy sewing a sheepskin ...’

‘Listen to me ... Let him just promise before witnesses, so that there’s something solid to get a grip on ... There’s still the law, and justice, never fear. And there’s one catch already, because he got the land from your mother.’

‘A right big deal, four morgen – for me and your wife ...’

‘But he hasn’t given it to you or my wife! And all these years he’s been sowing and reaping! He’ll pay you well for it, with interest ... I say again, don’t oppose the old man in anything. Nod, make up to him, go to the wedding, don’t begrudge a good word, and you’ll see, we’ll steal a march on him ... And if goodwill fails, the courts will not. You know Jagna well enough ... she could help you a bit ... have a word ... She could get round the old man even better ... Agreed? ... Time I was off ...’

‘Agreed! But get off quick, before I land you one on your mug and throw you out the gate!’ he muttered through clenched teeth.

‘You what, Antek? What?’ he jabbered in alarm, for Antek had abandoned the cutter and was striding towards him, pale, with a terrible look in his eyes.

‘You Judas scum, you thief!’ he spat out the words, foaming at the mouth with hatred, so that the blacksmith leapt up and fled as fast as he could.

‘Is he out of his mind, or what?’ he thought, once on the road. ‘I give him good advice ... and what does he do? Let him go be a hired hand if he’s that stupid. Let the old man throw him out, I’ll even help ... but one way or another, I’ll not let the land go ... So that’s your game! You wanted to clock me one, chuck me out the gates because I wanted to share with you ... and me coming like a brother with a good word! That’s your game! Aha, you want it all for yourself! We’ll see about that! You wheedled my thoughts out of me. I’ll fix you, bastard, till you shake with the English ague!’ He grew more and more incensed, for he was enraged that Antek had seen through his schemes and was even ready to give him away to the old man. That was what he feared the most.

‘Got to put a stop to that!’ he decided immediately and, despite his dread of Antek, he turned back to Boryna’s.

‘Is the master about?’ he asked Witek, who was in front of the cottage, aiming stones at the geese swimming on the pond.

'Ha, he's over at hers! Why, them's gone off to the miller's to ask 'em to the wedding.'

'I'll go that way, maybe I'll meet him!' he thought and went in the direction of the mill, dropping in at home on the way to tell his wife to dress up, take the children and head for Antek's as soon as the bells rang for midday.

'He'll soon tell you what to do! Do nothing by yourself and don't butt in, for you're a fool, but if it comes to it, start bawling and hug your father's knees and beg him ... and listen carefully to what your father says, and what Antek says first ...'

The blacksmith instructed her thus for the space of a good prayer, while looking out of the window to see if anyone was on the bridge.

'I'll step in at the mill and see if they've done the millet.' The wait at home was dragging.

He went off slowly, however, pausing and pondering. 'Aye, who knows what he'll do? He cursed me, but maybe he's prepared to do as I advised ... just as well the woman'll be there to see ... If he doesn't, and they quarrel, the old man'll throw him out ... One way or another, we'll rake something in for ourselves ...' Chuckling gleefully, he rubbed his hands together, shoved on his cap and fastened his capote since it was windy and a piercing cold had risen from the pond.

'There'll be a frost or more foul weather,' he murmured, pausing on the bridge and gazing at the sky ... Clouds were scudding low, drab and heavy, muddy as a flock of dirty rams. The pond gave deep mutters, splashing occasionally on to its shores, where here and there among the stooping black alders and forked branches of the willows glimmered the red shapes of women washing clothes, their wooden paddles smacking vigorously along both banks. It was empty on the roads; gaggles of geese wallowed in the thick mud and in the ditches, full of fallen leaves and debris, and children were shouting outside the cottages. Cockerels began crowing in the farmyards, as though heralding change.

'I'll find them more quickly at the mill!' he muttered and headed in that direction.

Meanwhile, as soon as the blacksmith had left, Antek began hacking at the chaff so fiercely that he lost himself completely in the work and by noon had chopped so much that Kuba, just back from the forest, cried:

'My, it's enough for a whole week!' He was so loud in his surprise that Antek started and shoved aside the chaff-cutter, before stretching and making for the cottage.

'What will be, will be, but I have to settle with Father today!' he decided. 'A Gypsy that one, a Judas, but maybe his advice is sound ... Aye, maybe he has a point ...' He thought about the blacksmith and looked in at his father's side of the house but quickly withdrew, for there sat twenty children or so, all reading aloud ... Roch was teaching them, keeping a keen eye out for any pranks ... Pacing among them, rosary in hand, he listened, correcting sometimes, tugging an ear or patting a head, and many a time he'd sit down and patiently explain, and asked questions to which the children all vied to reply, talking over one another like turkeys when someone provokes them ... and so loudly they could be heard on the other side of the house ...

Hanka was making dinner and chatting with her father, old Bylica, who rarely came by, as he was ill and could barely move about.

He sat by the window, leaning on his stick and looking around the room, at the children who were huddled quietly in a corner, or glancing at Hanka ... He was quite grey, his lips trembled, his voice was weak and bird-like, and a constant wheezing sounded in his chest ...

'You've had breakfast, eh?' she asked quietly.

'Eh ... well, Weronka forgot to give it me ... and I didn't like to remind her, no ...'

'Weronka starves even the dogs – they're forever coming here to be fed!' Hanka cried, for she was still angry at her older sister from the previous winter, after their mother's death, when the other had taken all that was left and would hand nothing over, so they hardly saw each other now.

'Well, it's not flush at theirs, oh no,' he defended Weronka gently. 'Stach is threshing for the organist, so he eats there and takes forty groszy a day on top ... and so many mouths to feed at the house there aren't potatoes enough to go round ... True, they've two cows and there's milk, so butter and cheese for town and she makes a few groszy there ... but she forgets to give me something to eat ... aye, it's no wonder ... so many children ... and there's weaving woollen skirts for folk ... and spinning ... works like an ox ... Do I need much, though? Just regular ... every day ... well ...'

'Well, come to us in the spring, if it's so bad at that bitch's ...'

'Nay, I'm not complaining, not blaming, only ... only ...' his voice broke suddenly.

'You could watch the geese, mind the children ...'

'Anything, Hanka dear, I'd do anything,' he whispered quietly.

'There's room in here, we'd put a bed in, you'd be warm ...'

'Why, I'd be fine in the barn, with the horses, as long as it were with you, Hanka, and not have to go back! As long as ...' He choked as he implored and tears began to drip from his sunken reddened eyes ... 'She took away my quilt, said the children had nothing to sleep under ... aye, they were that frozen, I'd take 'em in to sleep with me ... but my sheepskin's worn through and gives no warmth ... and my bed's been took ... and it's cold on my side ... She won't allow me even a log ... and every spoonful she begrudges ... chases me out to beg ... when I've not the strength – I barely dragged myself here ...'

'Heavens above! Why did you never say it were so bad ...'

'Nay ... my girl ... He's a good man, but always out earning ... what's to do ...'

'That hellcat! She takes half the land and half the house and everything and that's what she gives you for your board! You should go to the law! They were to feed you and give you firewood and what you needed for clothing, and that twelve roubles a year from us ... which debt we've paid ... is that not so, eh?'

'True! You're honest, it's true ... but the few zlotys from you that I hid for myself for my burial³ she wormed out o' me ... and then more were needed ... Aye, my child ...' He fell silent and sat quiet and hunched, more akin to a pile of old wood shavings than a human being.

After dinner, when the blacksmith's wife arrived with the children and began to greet everyone, he took the bundle that Hanka had stealthily prepared and slipped away.

Boryna had not returned for dinner.

The blacksmith's wife decided to wait, until night-time if need be. Hanka arranged her work by the window, drawing the hemp across the heddle bar of her loom, and only seldom did she add some diffident word to the discussion between Antek and his sister. He was recounting his grievances, all of which his sister echoed, but not for long, as they were interrupted by the arrival of Jagustynka, who said, with a show of reluctance:

'I'm fresh from the organist's – they'd summoned me for the laundry ... Maciej and Jagna had just been there to invite them to the wedding. They're going! Aye, each to his own kind, the rich clinging to the rich ... and the priest they've invited too ...'

'They invited the priest?' shrieked Hanka.

'Why, is he a saint or what? They invited him and he said happen he'd come ... why not? Is the young bride not beautiful, will there not be good food and drink? The miller and wife have said they'll come with their daughter. Ho, ho, as Lipce is Lipce, there's not been such a wedding! I well know, for we'll be doing the cooking with Ewka from the millers'. Ambrozy's already butchered a hog, they're making sausage ...' she broke off suddenly, for they were all sitting sullenly, no one saying or asking a thing. Surveying them all carefully, she exclaimed:

'You're up to something!'

'Nothing to do with you if we are!' the blacksmith's wife said so sharply that Jagustynka was offended and joined Józka on the other side of the house, where she was tidying away the benches and stools, as the children had dispersed and Roch had gone off to the village.

'Of course Father will begrudge himself nothing,' the blacksmith's wife whispered, aggrieved.

'Can he not afford it?' said Hanka and fell silent in alarm at Antek's threatening look. So they sat, almost without speaking, and waited. One or the other would say something, which was followed again by a heavy, hollow, troubling silence ...

In front of the cottage and on the porch, Witek and the children were making such a row that Lapa began to bark and the cottage shook.

'He must have ready cash aplenty. He's always selling something and what does he spend it on?'

Waving his sister's words away, Antek went out to get some air. He was wearied of the house and his alarm and anxiety were growing, though he did not know why ... He waited for his father with increasing impatience, yet rejoiced in his soul that the latter had still not appeared. 'It's not about the land, but Jagna!' He remembered what the blacksmith had said the day before. 'Lying dog!' he exclaimed with passion. He set about fixing the winter lagging at the cottage walls, Witek fetching leaf litter from the heap, and he beat in more stakes, but his hands shook and he kept pausing in the work. He leaned against the wall and peered through the naked leafless trees at the pond and beyond, at Jagna's cottage ... No, it wasn't love growing in him but anger and a thousand hateful feelings, surprising even him! 'Bitch, they threw her a bone, the scum, and she jumped at it!' he thought.

But then other memories emerged, came crawling out from somewhere, from those bare fields, the roads, the gnarled and blackened orchards, and settled on his heart, tugging at his thoughts, looming before his eyes ... until the sweat covered his brow, his eyes flashed and he was seized by a powerful, passionate trembling! ... *Hej!* That time in the orchard ... and in the woods ... and when they were coming back from town together ...

Jesus! He almost reeled, for suddenly he saw her glowing face before him, heard her ardent gasps, beheld her blue eyes and those full lips, so red, so near he could feel her breath, its heat erupting against him ... and that low voice, tremulous, burning with love and ardour: 'Jantoś! Jantoś!' She bent over him, so close he could feel her right beside him, her breasts, her arms, her legs ... He rubbed his eyes to drive away the beguiling phantom, and all the implacable fury dripped from his heart like ice from the thatch when the spring sunshine warms it. Love stirred again and painful longing raised its thorny head – such a terrible longing, you could beat your head against a wall and howl to the high heavens!

'A thunderbolt strike her!' he exclaimed, coming to, and glanced quickly at Witek to see if he'd guessed anything ... Three weeks he'd been in a fever, awaiting some miracle, but he could do nothing, oppose nothing! Such mad thoughts and plans had come to him then that he'd run to try and see her. There was a night he'd stalked her cottage like a dog, in the rain and the cold! She never came out, but avoided him, passed him by at a distance on the road!

Forget it, then! And he hardened towards her more and more, towards everything! She was Father's; that made her a stranger, a stray, a homeless dog, a thief stealing the land – that highest good – to be beaten to death with a stick!

Hadn't he wanted to confront his father many a time and say to his face: you cannot marry Jagna, she's mine! But his hair stood on end with fear at what the old man, all the folk, what the whole village would say?

For Jagna would be his stepmother, like a mother – how could that be, how? It had to be a sin, it had to! He was afraid even to think of it, for his heart froze with inexplicable horror, with fear before some terrible divine punishment ... And not saying a word to anyone, but carrying it inside like a burning coal, a living flame, which scorched to the very bone ... it was beyond human strength, beyond it.

And a week from now, this wedding ...

'Master's coming!' Witek called quickly and Antek shuddered with dread.

It was growing dark outside already.

The dying light showered the village like warm crimson ash from hidden embers – the sunset was fading, growing pale under the drab clouds that the wind was chasing and pummelling westwards, stacking them in huge mounds. It was growing cold, the earth was hardening, the air sharp and bracing as before a frost and so clear that the stamp and bellow of livestock being herded for watering carried loud on the air, and the creaking of gates and well winches, conversations, children's shouts, and dogs' barks flew more distinctly across the pond. Here and there, windows were twinkling already and long, quivering reflections fell across the water in shining shards ... while beyond the woods a great red full moon rose slowly, leaving an afterglow as from some fire blazing somewhere deep in the forest.

Boryna changed into his workaday clothes and went outside to the farmstead. He looked in on the horses, the cows, the barn and even the pigs, scolded Kuba for some misdeed and Witek too, for letting the calves get out of their stalls and stray among the cows, and when he returned to his chamber, they were all there waiting for him ... They were silent, all eyes upon him, but they soon dropped their gaze, for he paused in the middle of the room, looked around at them and said derisively:

'Everyone here! A proper courtroom!'

'It's no court, we've just come to ask something of you,' said the blacksmith's wife diffidently.

'Why's your husband not here?'

'He's got an urgent job, so he stayed at home ...'

'Aye, a job ... aye.' He smiled shrewdly, throwing off his capote and beginning to pull off his boots, and they all remained silent, not knowing where to start. The blacksmith's wife cleared her throat and shushed the children, who'd started to caper about. Hanka sat at the threshold and nursed her boy, her eyes darting nervously to Antek's face, where he sat by the window, considering what to say and trembling with impatience and emotion. Józia, meanwhile, calmly peeled potatoes at the fireside, added wood to the fire and observed everyone curiously, unable to guess what it was all about.

'Out with it – what do you want!' he exclaimed sharply, exasperated by the silence.

'Well ... Antek, you say ... we've come about the settlement ...' faltered the blacksmith's wife.

'The settlement's done and the wedding's on Sunday, I can tell you that much!'

'We know. It's not that.'

'What then?'

'You settled six whole morgen!'

'Because I wanted to, and if I feel like it, I'll sign over the lot in a flash ...'

'You can, if it all turns out to be yours!' said Antek.

'Whose is it then, eh? Whose?'

'Ours. The children's.'

'You're stupid as a ram! The land's mine and I'll do as I please with it!'

'Maybe ...'

'You'll stop me, eh? You?'

'Me, all of us, and if not, then the court will stop you!' he exploded passionately, since he could bear it no longer.

'Threatening me with the law, are you? The law! Shut your mouth while I'm still feeling kindly, or you'll regret it!' he shouted springing forward, fists raised.

'We won't let you wrong us!' yelled Hanka, jumping to her feet.

'And what do you want? Three morgen of sand she brought and a bit of old canvas, and now she's talking back?'

'You've not given Antek even that much, not even those morgen after his mother, and we work like farmhands here, like beasts.'

'But you reap the benefit of three morgen.'

'And we work enough for twenty or even more!'

'If you're so wronged, go find something better!'

'We'll not go anywhere, for what's ours is here! Ours from our grandfathers and great-grandfathers!' Antek shouted.

The old man glared at him and said nothing in reply, but sat down by the stove and jabbed at the firebrands so hard with the poker there was a shower of sparks. He was angry, his face blazed and his hair kept falling over his eyes, incandescent as a lynx's ... but he restrained himself still, though barely ...

A long silence filled the room, and only quick breaths and gasps could be heard.

Hanka sobbed quietly and rocked the child, which had begun to whimper.

'We don't oppose your marrying, wed if you want to ...'

'Go ahead and oppose it – little I care!'

'Just withdraw the settlement,' Hanka added through her tears.

'Quiet, you! Hark at her, dammit, forever yapping like a bitch!' Boryna hurled the poker at the fire with such force that the firebrands rolled into the room.

'And you mind yourself – she's no wench of yours that you can mouth off at her!'

'Why is she talking back, then!'

'She's a right to ask about what's hers!' Antek yelled even louder.

'Sign it over, if you want, but settle what's left on us,' the blacksmith's wife began quietly.

'Fool! Listen to her, dividing up what's mine! Don't you worry, I'm not pensioning myself to you ... I've said my piece!'

'And we won't back down. We want justice.'

'You'll see justice, at the end of my stick.'

'Just you try, and you'll not survive to see your wedding ...'

And now father and son truly began to quarrel, to rush at each other, threaten and thump the table with their fists, shouting and listing all their grievances and injuries. Antek was so carried away and so agitated that he seethed with fury, and time and again he'd grab the old man by the arm or the collar and was ready to hit him ... but the old man still held himself in check. Not wanting a brawl, he pushed Antek away, rarely responding to his abuse, if only to avoid creating a spectacle for the neighbours and the whole village. Such a hue and cry arose in the cottage, such wailing, for both women were crying and calling out in turn, and the children too were screaming, that Kuba and Witek flew to the window from the yard ... but they could make nothing out, for everyone was shouting at once until, finally, when their voices gave out, they could only rasp curses and threats. Hanka burst into loud crying again as she leaned against the hood of the stove and through torrents of tears began to wail, beside herself:

'We're doomed to go begging, out in the world ... oh my Jesus, my Jesus! ... Like beasts we've worked ... day and night ... like servants ... and now what? God will punish you for the harm you have done us! He'll punish you ... A whole six morgen he's signed over ... and the clothes from Mother ... the beads ... everything ... and for who? Who? For such a pig? May you croak under a fence, you slut, for the hurt you've done us, and may the worms devour you, you wretch, you!'

'What did you say?' the old man bellowed, jumping at her ...

'That she's a wanton and a slut and the whole village knows it ... every one! Every single one!'

'Leave her out of it, or I'll smash your face against that wall, hands off ...' and he began to shake her so that Antek leapt forward to shield her and also began to shout:

'And I say so too! Me! She's a slut and a wanton! Anyone who wanted could have her – I say so!' he shouted, beside himself, saying the first thing that came into his head, but he was unable to finish because the old man, now completely enraged, punched him in the face so hard that his head smashed against the glazed cupboard, which fell to the ground and he along with it ... He soon sprang up, covered in blood, and hurled himself at his father.

They fell upon each other like two mad dogs, grabbing each other by the shirt and dragging and hurling each other about the room, smashing into beds, chests, the walls, their heads slamming against them. An indescribable shrieking rose as the women tried to separate them, but they toppled on to the ground, and, locked together in mutual hatred and grievance, they rolled about, crushing and choking each other ...

Luckily for them, the neighbours soon pulled them apart and separated them ...

They carried Antek to the other half of the house and poured water over him, so exhausted was he and weakened by the loss of blood, for his face was all cut up on the broken glass.

The old man was fine; his spencer was a little torn and his face scratched and livid with fury ... He swore and chased out the people who had massed, closed the door to the hallway and sat down by the stove.

But he could not calm down, for what they had said about Jagna kept echoing back to him, and stabbed at his heart like a knife.

'I'll never forgive you, you dog, never!' he vowed in his heart. 'To say such things of my Jagna ...' But what he'd often heard of her kept coming now to mind, what they used to say, and to which he'd paid no heed! He felt hot and strangely stifled, strangely dispirited ... 'It's not true, blabbermouths they are and envious, goes without saying!' he cried aloud, but other gossip kept coming back to him too. 'How are they not going to tattle if my own son says it! Scum!' The memories devoured him like fire ...

And when Józia tidied up the remains of the fight and finally served supper, though it was late, he tried the potatoes but put down his spoon; he couldn't swallow.

'Have you given the horses their fodder?' he asked Kuba.

'O' course ...'

'Where's Witek?'

'He's run off to get Ambrozy to look at Antek's head. His mug's swollen big as a pot,' he added and quickly left, for the moon was up and tonight he was heading to the woods to hunt ...

'Scum, that full o' bread they need to pick a fight,' he muttered.

Boryna, too, went off to the village, but he didn't look in at Jagna's, though a light was shining at the window. At the very door, he turned back and wandered along the road to the mill.

It was a chilly, sparkling night. Frost numbed the ground; the moon hung high above and shone so bright that the whole pond glittered, vivid as silver. The trees threw long, wavering shadows across the empty roads. It was late, the lights were going out in the houses and the whitewashed walls stood out among the bare orchards. Silence and night enveloped the whole village, except for the mill clattering and the water babbling monotonously ... Walking round one side of the pond and then the other, Maciej did not know what to do with himself. He did not calm down, not at all; anger and hatred agitated him all the more. He even went as far as the inn, sent for the Voyt and drank until almost midnight, but he did not drown the serpent ... He did make one resolution, however.

Early next day, as soon as he was up, he looked in at the other side. Antek was still in bed, his face bound with a bloody cloth, but he raised himself a little.

'Get out of my house this instant, so that there is not a trace of you left!' the old man yelled. 'You want war, you want the law: off you go, make your complaint, make your claim. You've sown, come the summer you can reap, and now, get out! Out of my sight! Do you hear!' he bellowed, for Antek had got up, but made no reply ... and began to dress slowly ...

'I want you out of here by midday!' he called, from the hallway now.

Antek did not reply, as if he had not heard ...

'Józka, call Kuba to harness the mare to the cart and take 'em wherever they want!'

'But there's something up with Kuba. He's lying on the pallet and only moans and says he cannot get up at all, that his crooked leg is hurting ...'

'Ha, his leg is hurting! That sluggard, taking a rest ...' He began to do the farm's morning chores himself.

But Kuba had truly taken ill. He didn't say what ailed him, though Boryna asked, only that he was ill, and moaned and groaned so that the horses neighed and approached the bunk, sniffing his face and licking him, and Witek kept bringing him water in a pail and stealthily rinsed some bloody rags in the stream ...

The old man did not notice, for he was making sure that Antek's family were leaving.

And they were.

Without any clamour, without a quarrel, without opposition, they packed, carried out their things, tied bundles. Hanka was almost fainting with misery; Antek was reviving her with water and urging her on to get out of his father's sight promptly, as quickly as possible ...

He borrowed a horse from Kłab – he would not use his father's – and drove their things to Hanka's father, to the other end of the village, beyond the inn itself ...

A few farmers came from the village with Roch at their head and wanted to make peace between them, but neither son nor father would hear of it ...

'Let him try and see how freedom and his own bread taste,' the old man said.

Antek did not respond to their persuasion, just shook his fist and cursed and threatened so terribly that Roch paled and retreated to the women, of whom quite a few had gathered now in the yard and the porch to help Hanka, but mainly to give voice to their complaints, and to gossip and hold forth!

While Józia, her face swollen with crying, was serving dinner to her father and Roch, the others were driving out of the farmyard on to the road with the children and the last of their things ... Antek did not turn to look at the cottage; he just crossed himself, sighing deeply, whipped the horses, having buttressed the cart, for it was heavily laden, and walked like a dead man, his face as white as paper, his eyes burning fixedly and his teeth chattering as in a fever ... but he said not a word. Hanka, meanwhile, trailed after the cart. The elder boy hung on to his mother's woollen skirt and cried to high heaven; she pressed the younger one to her breast and drove the cow, a gaggle of geese and two skinny pigs ahead of her, and wailed and cursed and lamented so that people came out of their houses and accompanied them as on a procession.

Back at the old man's, they ate dinner in gloomy silence.

Old Łapa barked on the porch, ran after the cart, returned again and howled ... Witek called him, but the dog would not listen. He ran about the garden, sniffed round the yard, ran into Antek's room, circled it a few times, fell into the hallway, barked, whimpered, rubbed against Józia and again dashed about like a mad beast, or sat on his rump and stared straight ahead, stupefied, until finally he leapt up, curled his tail beneath him and raced after Antek.

'So Łapa's gone after 'em too ...'

'He'll be back when he's starving. He'll be back, never fear, Józia,' the old man said softly. 'Stop bawling, silly! Go tidy up on the other side – Roch will have somewhere to stay. Call Jagustynka, she'll help you ... Stop your blubbing, nay ...' He took her head and stroked it and pressed her to his chest and hugged her ...

'When I go to town, I'll buy you some boots.'

'Will you, *Tato*? Will you really?'

'I'll buy 'em, I'll buy 'em, and more besides. Just be a good girl, and mind the household!'

'Can you buy me stuff for a bodice, like Nastusia Gołębianka's.'

'Aye, lass, aye ...'

'And ribbons, only long ones – I've got none for your wedding.'

'Just say what you need and you shall have it, all of it.'

CHAPTER 11

'You sleeping, Jagna?'

'Wish I could. I woke at dawn and my head's been full of it, that the wedding's today ... I cannot believe it.'

'Are you downcast, my lass, eh?' she asked more quietly, a wary hope in her heart ...

'Why would I be downcast! I'm leaving your home for my own ...'

The old woman said nothing. Stifling the grief that had suddenly pierced her, she got up from the bed, threw on some clothes and went to the stable to wake the boys. They'd slept in after yesterday's unbraiding,¹ for it was broad daylight already. First light had drenched the earth in silvery, glittering hoar frost and dawn was kindling in the east – as though someone had tossed glowing embers across the sky.

Dominikowa washed in the hallway and stepped quietly about the room, glancing from time to time at Jagna, whose head was barely visible among the bedclothes in the shadows that still lurked in the chamber ...

'Lie still, lass, lie still! This last time at your mother's, the last!' she thought with tenderness and that painful sorrow that kept returning. She couldn't believe that it really was today, and had to keep going over all of it again ... Yes, she herself had wanted it, and now, and now ... Terror seemed to overpower and shake her so that she shrank from the pain and sank down on the bed ... He was a good man, Boryna – he would respect and not wrong her ... and Jaguś would lead him wherever she pleased, for the old man thought the world of her ...

No, it was not that she feared, not that ... but the stepchildren! Aye ... why drive Antek's family out? Now they'd truly be aggrieved and look for vengeance! ... Yet if he hadn't, Antek would have been to hand and some offence to God or worse would have come of it! ... My Jesus! Nothing to be done now ... the banns had been put up ... the hog was slaughtered, the guests invited ... so much done already ... the settlement in the chest ... 'No, no! What will be, will be, and while I live and breathe, no harm will come to her!' she thought resolutely and went to harangue the boys again for not getting up.

She meant to summon the girl sternly on returning, but Jagna had dropped off again. Steady quiet breathing came from the bed, and again all manner of doubts and griefs caught hold and clung to her like hawks, their talons tearing at her heart, screaming dread and alarm! She knelt at the window, resting her sore, reddened eyes in the first light, and prayed long and fervently. She rose strong and ready for anything.

'Jaguś! Up you get my girl, it's time! Ewka will soon arrive to start the cooking, and that much work still!'

'Is it fine out?' she asked, lifting her heavy head.

'Indeed, it's shimmering with frost out there! Sun'll soon be up ...'

Jagna dressed quickly. The old woman helped her and was thinking hard, for finally she said:

'I'll say again what I've said many a time ... Boryna must be respected ... he's a good man ... Don't go loitering with just anyone ... start tongues wagging again ... Folk are like dogs ... forever wanting something to bite on! Do you hear me, lass?'

'I hear you, I hear you, but you talk as though I've no sense of my own ...'

'There's never too much of good advice ... Careful too, no hoity-toity with Boryna, but gentle and kindly. An old 'un's always more sensitive to it than a young 'un ... and who knows, he might withdraw the land, or stuff his ready cash down his shirt!'

'Like I care,' she retorted impatiently.

'Because you're young and stupid ... Just take a look at the village, at the people, you'll soon see: what are they quarrelling about, going to law over, striving for? Only land, property! Would life be good for you without that field, without that holy earth, eh? The Lord Jesus did not create you for poverty, for the life of a hired hand, oh no! What have I striven for all my life? Only for you, Jaguś! And now I'll be left all alone!'

'Are the boys off and away, then? They're staying ...'

'They're as much comfort as yesterday!' she cried and burst into tears. 'And you need to keep peace with the stepchildren,' she added, wiping her eyes.

'Józka's a good girl, and Grzela won't be back from the army in a hurry ... and ...'

'Keep away from the blacksmith.'

'But seems he and Maciej esteem each other ...'

'Blacksmith's up to something, oh yes! But I've got my eye on him ... It's worse with Antek's lot, for they didn't want to make peace ... The reverend father wanted to reconcile them yesterday ... they wouldn't have it.'

'Because Maciej was a mad dog to chase 'em from the house!' she cried with passion.

'What's that you're saying, Jaguś? What! Why Antek spoke fiercest against you, and wanted to take the land away and railed and swore things against you that can scarce be repeated.'

'Antek? Against me? They're lying, may their foul tongues shrivel up!'

'And why are you taking his side, eh?' she asked, threateningly.

'Because everyone's on at him. I'm not some beggar's dog who'll run after anyone for a bit o' bread! I can see well enough he's being wronged ...'

'Maybe you'd like to hand him the settlement ... eh?'

But Jagna could not manage a reply, for the tears began to stream from her eyes and she rushed to the storeroom, shut the door behind her and wailed for a long time ...

Dominikowa did not hinder her, for a new vexation had slipped into her heart ... but there was no time to ponder, for here was Ewka, the boys were yawning in the hallway, and it was time to get to work and make the final preparations ...

The sun rose and the day rolled briskly on.

A night frost had taken hold. The puddles and edges of the pond were hard with ice and the smaller cattle could not stand upright in the fields.

It was growing warmer; in the shade and under fences it was still grey, but glittering beads of ice dripped from the thatches and mists rose over the marshes like puffs of smoke. The air was so transparent that the fields round about were as clear as the palm of your hand, and the forest seemed so close, you could make out individual trees ...

Not a single cloud appeared in the low blue sky.

But the weather did not bode well, for crows were hovering near the houses and the cockerels were crowing.

It was a Sunday, and though the bells were not yet summoning people to church, it was humming everywhere already like a hive. Half the village was preparing for the wedding of Boryna and Jagna.

Girls were running between the farmsteads through the frosty gardens carrying bunches of ribbons and woollen skirts and headdresses of every kind ...

The cottages were a turmoil of making ready, trying on, dressing up, so that joyful voices and even wedding songs burst forth from many a wide-open door or window.

Dominikowa's house, too, was all clamour and commotion, as is usual on such a day! The house had been freshly whitewashed, although the lime had faded somewhat in the damp, but it was visible from a distance, adorned as for Whitsuntide. The day before, the boys had already stuck spruce branches in the thatch, in gaps in the walls, anywhere they could, and scattered a path across the yard right to the hallway with fir branches and pine needles. It smelled like a forest in springtime.

Inside, too, it was decked out grand.

On the other side of the house, where they'd stored the clutter, a mighty fire was roaring and Ewka from the miller's was cooking with the help of Jagustynka and other women neighbours. Meanwhile, in the first chamber, they had put all the spare furniture in the storeroom so that only pictures were left and the boys arranged sturdy benches and long tables along the walls. This room too was clean and freshly whitewashed, the stove was curtained with a blue cloth and Jagna had decorated the ceiling and beams, blackened with age, with abundant paper cuttings. Maciej had brought coloured paper from town, and she had snipped frayed circles, flowers, all manner of wonders: a dog chasing a sheep and a shepherd running after him with a stick, or an entire procession with a priest and banners and holy pictures, and more still than you could remember, but all so exact and lifelike that folk had been amazed the day before, at the unbraiding ... And she could make a lot more besides, whatever she'd thought up or simply seen ... so that there wasn't a cottage in Lipce without her cuttings ...

She pulled herself together a little in the storeroom and emerged to stick the rest of the pictures along the walls and under the paintings, as there was no room left anywhere else.

'Jaguś! Leave off your trifles. Bridesmaids'll be here any minute ... People will start arriving soon, the musicians are roaming the village already ... and she's fooling about ...'

'I've time, I've time ...' she replied curtly but soon gave up sticking – her patience had worn thin ... She sprinkled the floor with pine needles and covered the table with a fine linen cloth, tidied in the storeroom, chatted with her brothers or stepped outside the cottage and gazed on the world at length. But not a drop of joy did she feel inside, not a drop. All she could think of was that she'd dance herself silly, that she'd get her fill of the music and singing she craved. She was like the autumn day, bright and sparkling, but lifeless and sombre. If everything around were not

constantly reminding her that today was the wedding, she wouldn't have remembered. Yesterday, at the unbraiding, Boryna had given her all eight strings of beads left by his wife ... They lay at the bottom of the chest; she hadn't even tried them on ... She didn't care about them, she didn't care about anything today. She would have liked to fly away ... far into the wide world ... but where? If only she knew! She felt disgust for everything, and her mother's words regarding Antek kept coming back to her ... He, speak ill of her? Antek? She couldn't believe it, she didn't want to ... or she'd be ready to cry! ... And yet? ... Yesterday, when she was washing laundry at the pond he'd walked by and not even glanced at her! And in the morning when she and Boryna had gone to confession, they'd met him in front of the church ... He turned aside as though he'd met a mad dog ... And yet? ... Let him scorn her, if that's how it was, let him scorn her!

She began to mutiny against him, but suddenly memories of that evening when they were coming back from cabbage trimming at Boryna's flashed through her mind, plunging her in flames, and engulfed her soul with such force, rose so sharply within her, she could hardly bear it ... and out of the blue she called to her mother:

'You know what, after the wedding, don't cut my hair!'

'Ha, what cleverness has she come up with now? Since when has a girl's hair not been cut after the wedding?'

'They don't do it at the manor or in town!'

'Course not, aye, for their wantonness, to trick people and make themselves out to be something other than they are. Hark at her, a new order she'd be ushering! Let the manor's young ladies make 'emself ridiculous and a laughing stock, let 'em go about with manes like Jewish women – let 'em, since they're stupid. But you are a farmer's daughter, not some town dross, so you do as God has ordained, as has always been done among our farming kind since time immemorial ... I know those town notions, I do ... they've not ever brought anything good! Pakulanka went off to service in town and what became of her? The Voyt said that a note came to the chancellery saying she'd suffocated a child and found herself in jail ... Or that Wojtek, a cousin of Boryna's on his sister's side, he did mighty fine in town, and now he's going round the villages begging. He'd had a farm before, at Wólka, horses, and bread up to his ears ... soft rolls he wanted, and now he carries a staff and a bag for his old age ...'

But Jagna did not listen to these wise counsels, and would not suffer them even to speak of cutting her hair. Ewka had been persuading her and Ewka knew what was what, had been to many a village and walked to Częstochowa with the pilgrims every year. Jagustynka spoke her piece too, but full of mockery and derision, as usual:

'Leave the plait, leave it, it'll come in handy for Boryna. He can wind it round his hand for a better grip and give you a sounder beating with his stick ... You'll cut it off yourself after that ... I've known many such ...' She said no more, as Witek was calling her. After Antek's eviction, Jagustynka had moved in, since Józia could not manage the household alone. She'd come now to help Ewka cook, and she looked in at Boryna's too from time to time, as the old man did not have a head for anything today. Józia had been dressing up at the blacksmith's all morning, and Kuba was still lying ill.

'Come quick, Kuba needs you urgent,' the boy hurried her.

'I'll be right there. I'll take a quick look, my dears, and see what's what, and I'll be back in a flash ...'

'Jaguś, you need to get a move on – bridesmaids'll be here,' her mother urged her.

But Jagna did not hurry. She wandered about languidly, perching on the benches, then she'd jump up and begin tidying, but the work would slip from her hands and she'd linger at the window, gazing out mindlessly. Her soul lapped within her like water and seemed time and again to beat as though against a rock, against her memories ...

Inside the house the hubbub grew, for various friends kept dropping by, first kin, then housewives, and according to old custom each would bring a chicken, a loaf of white bread, cake, salt, flour, pork fat or a silver rouble wrapped in paper – all this to return the favour of the wedding invitation, so that the mistress of the house should not sustain too great a cost. They'd take a glass of sweetened vodka with the old woman and chat and marvel before rushing away.

And Dominikowa bustled about – supervising the cooking, tidying, advising, with an opinion and an eye on everything. She chivvied the boys constantly, for they were dawdling, and as soon as they could they escaped to the village, to the Voyt's, where the musicians and groomsmen were gathering already ...

Hardly anyone came to High Mass. The priest was cross that a wedding had put the service of God out of their heads – which was true enough, but folk told themselves it was a rare Sunday that witnessed such a wedding.

Right after dinner, all those invited from the neighbouring villages began to arrive.

The sun had already sailed past midday. Its pale, filtered autumn light made the earth glisten as though drenched in dew. Windows were ablaze, the pond shimmered and twinkled, roadside ditches glittered like watery panes of glass – the whole world was glutted with the fading light of autumn's dwindling warmth.

A deep, soundless hush swathed the gilded land.

The day flared bright and then slowly dimmed.

But Lipce was humming like a fair.

As soon as the bells had rung for vespers, the musicians tumbled out from the Voyt's cottage and on to the road.

First came the fiddles in tandem with flutes, behind them throbbed the tabour with its little cymbals, then came the bass viols, adorned with ribbons and prancing merrily.

The two matchmakers followed and the groomsmen – of whom there were six.

Young men, one and all, handsome, slender as pines, slim in the waist and broad of shoulder, passionate dancers, impudent braggards, keen brawlers, and mettlesome – every one a farmer's son, born and bred.

They marched along the road in a band, shoulder to shoulder, until the ground thudded under their feet, and so gleeful, so festive and dressed so fine, the sun played on their striped trousers, red spencers and the bunches of ribbons on their hats, while their white capotes flapped, unfastened, in the wind like wings ...

With shrill cries and merry songs, they stamped their feet energetically and advanced so noisily that it seemed a young forest had taken wing and was flying like a whirlwind ...

The musicians played polonaises² as they passed from house to house to summon the wedding guests. Some folk brought out vodka, some invited them inside, where they reciprocated with songs, and everywhere people came out to join them, dressed in their best, and they went on together, until finally everyone was singing at the bridesmaids' windows:

*'Come out, Kasia, come out, maid,
The wedding's come along –
There'll be playing, there'll be dancing,
Fiddle, bass and song,
And who won't eat and who won't drink ...
It's bed for him ere long!
Oj ta dana,³ dana, oj ta dana, da!'*

They roared in unison with such force, the sound echoed throughout the village. Their festive voices rang out over the fields, lingered beneath the woodland trees and flew into the great wide world.

People came out of their houses, into the gardens, up to their fences, and some, though not guests, joined them too, to take a good look and have a good listen, so that even before they arrived, almost the entire village was jostled together, surrounding the wedding guests in a throng, so that they progressed more and more slowly, while the children ran ahead in a numberless swarm with songs and shrieks. They accompanied the guests right to the bridal cottage, where the musicians played them a dignified entry and then turned back to fetch the groom.

Witek, meanwhile, who'd proudly kept the groomsmen company, ribbons fastened to his spencer, now leapt ahead.

'Master, here come the musicians with the groomsmen!' he shouted at the windows and raced off to Kuba.

They played thunderously on the porch, and Boryna came out in an instant, threw the door wide open, greeting them and inviting them inside, but the Voyt and Szymon seized him each by an arm and took him straight to Jagna, for it was time to get to church.

He stepped along smartly and it was a wonder how young he looked. Neatly shorn and clean-shaven, bedecked in wedding clothes, he was handsome as few are, and since he was mightily self-assured and broad-shouldered, his form was visible from afar. Nor was his face lacking in gravity; he laughed merrily with the farmhands and chatted, mostly with the blacksmith, who seemed always underfoot.

They escorted him solemnly to Dominikowa's, folk stepping aside, and then led him noisily to the chamber with music and songs.

But Jagusia was not there. The women were still dressing her in the storeroom, tightly shut and keenly guarded against the young men, who were pushing at the door or making tiny gaps in the panelling while they joked with the bridesmaids, so that only squeals, laughter and women's screams could be heard in reply.

Mother and sons greeted the guests, offered them vodka, seated the elders on benches and kept an eye on everything, for folk had piled in so that it was hard to cross the room; they stood about in the hallway and spilled out right into the farmyard. Nor were they just any guests, oh no! Farmers all, born and bred, and the wealthiest too, and all kin, in-laws and friends of the Borynas and Pacześes, with still more friends even from far-flung villages.

Aye, there was not a Kłab nor a Winciorek nor any of the other one-morgen paupers to be seen, nor any of the small fry who hired themselves out and always hung about with old Kłab ... Not for a dog the fine sausage, and no honey for the pigs!

It was two prayers more before they opened the storeroom door and the organist's and miller's wives led Jagna out into the chamber, the bridesmaids encircling her, elegant beauties every one, more like a wreath than the flowers themselves. And she, the slenderest among them and the most beautiful rose of all, stood in the middle, all in white, in velvet, in feathers, in ribbons, in silver and gold – so much like the picture that was carried in procession that a sudden hush fell on them, so dumbstruck were they and so amazed.

Hej! There'd never been one lovelier since the very first mazurka!

At once the groomsmen raised a clamour and roared at the top of their lungs:

'Proclaim, fiddle, proclaim!'

*Jaguś, ask pardon of your father and your mother.
Proclaim, flute, proclaim!
Jaguś, ask pardon of your brothers.'*

Boryna stepped forward, taking her by the hand, and both knelt while her mother took down the picture and made the sign of the cross over them, and blessed and sprinkled them with holy water, until Jaguś fell at her mother's feet in tears, and then turned to the rest, asking forgiveness of all and making her farewells. The women took her in their arms, hugging and passing her from one to the next, until all were crying together, and Józia most piteous of all, remembering her own dead mother.

They poured outside the cottage, arranged themselves in proper order and set off on foot, for it was but half a furlong to the church.

The musicians went ahead, playing vigorously.

Next came the groomsmen leading Jagna. She walked along, exuberant, smiling through the tears still clinging to her lashes, as gay as a flowering shrub and drawing all eyes to her like the sun. The braids coiled round her head were topped with a tall crown, glittering with golden thread, peacock eyes and sprigs of rosemary; long ribbons of every colour flowed down from her shoulders and flew behind her, fluttering like a rainbow. Her white skirt was tightly gathered at the waist and her bodice of sky-blue velvet was embroidered in silver. The sleeves of her chemise billowed, its abundant frills beneath her chin edged in deep blue thread, while around her neck strings and strings of beads and amber tumbled down her breast.

Behind her, the bridesmaids were leading Maciej.

Like a sturdy oak in the forest behind a slender pine, that was how he followed Jagna, with a swing in his gait and a glance now and then to the side of the road, where he thought he'd spied Antek among the throng.

And finally came Dominikowa with the matchmakers, Józia, the blacksmith, miller, organist and their wives, and the other most important guests.

And taking up the rear, the entire village marched the whole way.

By now the sun was setting. It hung huge and crimson above the forest, flooding the whole road, the pond and houses in its blood-red glow. Walking slowly through the light, they dazzled the eye with their ribbons, peacock feathers, flowers, red trousers, orange skirts, shawls and white capotes – as though a field full of the brightest blooms were swaying gently in the wind and singing, for now and then the bridesmaids would trill in thin high voices:

*'Ah, the wagons they rattling rattling go ...
Ah, they weep for you, Jaguś mine, weep for you so ...
Hej!
Ah da, they sing, da, they sing, sadly they sway ...
Ah da, Jaguś, sadly as you go your way ...
Hej!'*

Dominikowa cried the whole way, gazing at her daughter as upon a picture, and not taking in a word that was said to her.

In the church, Ambrozy was already lighting the candles at the altar.

They spruced themselves up in the vestibule, arranged themselves in pairs and set off towards the altar as the priest was coming out of the sacristy.

The wedding was quickly over, as the priest was hurrying to a sick man. When they were leaving the church, the organist began to play such mazurkas and *obereks* and *kujawiaks*⁴ that feet skipped of their own accord, and some folk almost burst into song, stopping themselves in the nick of time!

Everyone returned in happy disarray, all the way, just as they pleased, but loudly, as the groomsmen and bridesmaids were caterwauling as though they were being skinned alive.

Dominikowa rushed ahead, and was ready on the threshold to meet the couple with the holy picture, bread and salt, and then set about greeting and hugging everyone again, before inviting them inside!

The music struck up in the hallway, so that whoever stepped over the threshold threw an arm about the waist of the first woman to hand and launched into the ambling steps of the walking dance.⁵ And once inside, like a glittering snake of many colours, couples turned about the room, bending and circling, with a dignified doubling back and proud stamping, and walking, gliding, winding, pair after pair, head beside head – like a swaying field of ripe corn, blooming with cornflowers and poppies ... and in front, the first pair were Jagna and Boryna!

Even the lamps ranged along the stove's hood shook and the house rocked until it seemed the walls would burst with the crush of bodies and vigorous dancing!

The guests did many a round of the room before they were through.

The musicians now began to play the first dance for the bride, as had been the custom down the ages. Folk pressed against the walls and filled every corner, and the young men formed a great circle in which she began to dance! Her blood coursing so that her blue eyes shone and her white teeth gleaming in her blushing face, she danced tirelessly, switching partners constantly, as she had to take at least one turn with everyone.

The musicians played fiercely until their hands flagged, but Jagna had barely begun. Flushing more deeply, she whirled so furiously her ribbons flew, swishing behind her, whipping faces, and her skirts filled the chamber, billowing in a storm of dancing.

The lads pounded their fists on the tables with delight and spirited shouts.

Last of all, she turned to the groom. Boryna had been readying himself, for he leapt towards her like a lynx, seized her about the waist, spun her on the spot like a whirlwind and cried to the musicians:

'A mazurka! At it, boys!'

And they set their instruments screeching with all their might, until the room was seething!

Boryna, meanwhile, took a firm grip of Jagna, threw back the skirts of his capote, adjusted his hat, clicked his heels and took off like the wind!

Hej! He danced too – how he danced! How he spun on the spot, doubled back, stamped his heels till chips flew from the floor. How he whooped, and tossed and twirled Jagna, until, coiled tightly together, they spun around the room like a full spindle – summoning the force of a gale.

The musicians struck up a frantic, frenzied mazurka ...

Everyone crowded in doorways and corners, watching in silence, amazed, while Boryna tirelessly roistered, more spirited than ever. Many a guest could barely check their feet, which tapped in time to the music of their own accord. The most eager of them seized a girl and launched into the dance, without a care for anything!

Jagna, though strong, soon flagged and began to droop in his arms, and only then did he stop and lead her towards the storeroom.

'If that's the sort of fellow you are, then count yourself a brother of mine and ask me to stand godfather at the first christening!' called the miller, seizing his arm.

They were soon on the warmest of brotherly terms⁶ as the music paused and the feasting began.

Dominikowa, her sons, the blacksmith and Jagustynka scuttered about briskly, glasses and full bottles in their hands, and toasted everyone in turn. Józia and her friends came bearing wooden sieves piled high with slices of bread and cake. The hubbub grew and grew, for everyone had their own piece to say and all eagerly reached for a glass to make the most of the wedding.

On the bench under the window sat the miller with Boryna, the Voyt, the organist and the foremost farmers. A decent bottle of arak was already doing the rounds, passing from hand to hand. Beer was brought too – and they were clearly drinking away heartily, the way they were embracing like the best of friends!

Yet more folk were standing, gathered in groups, with whom and however they pleased, chattering loudly and raising a glass to each other.

And in the storeroom, lit up by a lamp borrowed from the organist, the housewives were gathered – the organist's and miller's wives being first among them – sitting on chests or on benches covered in aprons. They sat sedately, sipping mead through their teeth and picking delicately at slices of cake with their fingers, and barely a word did they utter, for they were listening attentively to the miller's wife talking about her children.

The hallway too was crowded and folk were even squeezing into the other side, until Ewka had to chase them out, as supper was being urgently prepared and its delicious aromas floated throughout the whole house, tickling nostrils.

The young spilled outside the cottage, into the farmyard, and on to the earth bench. It was a cold night, quiet and sprinkled with stars, so they cooled down and romped until the ground shook with laughter, shouts and running feet, for several were chasing about the garden until their elders shouted from the windows: 'Looking for flowers? Watch you don't lose anything else, girls, out there in the dark!'

Did anyone listen?

Meanwhile, in the main chamber, Jagna and Nastka Gołbianka were pacing about, arms about each other's waists, bursting into peals of laughter and whispering into each other's ears. Szymek, Dominikowa's elder son, watched them as they went, never taking his eyes from Nastka, and accosting her time and again with vodka, grinning and attempting to get a word in.

The blacksmith, all dressed up in his Sunday best, in a black capote and trouser legs pulled over his boots, darted about most nimbly of all. He was everywhere, drinking with everyone, enticing, toasting, chatting and scuttling about, so that his ginger pate and freckled face were forever bobbing up in different places.

The young danced another turn or two, but briefly and without much verve, for they were watching out for supper.

The elders, meanwhile, were deep in discussion, and the Voyt, drunk as he was, talked more and more loudly. Puffing himself up and beating the table with his fist, he commanded:

'It's I, the Voyt, who says this to you, so you'd better believe it. I'm an official, and I've been notified to call a meeting and resolve a price per morgen for the school ...'

'You, Piotr, can resolve a tanner a morgen for all we care; we won't give you a grosz anyway!'

'We won't!' roared someone else.

'Quiet – you will if an official's saying so ...'

'We've no need of such a school!' ⁷ said Boryna.

'Aye, no need!' chorused others.

'Why ... there's a school in Wola where my bairns have been going near three winters and what of it? They cannot even make out a prayer in the book ... to the dogs with such learning!' said another.

'Let their mothers teach 'em prayers – school's not for that. I, the Voyt, am telling you.'

'What's it for then?' yelled the fellow from Wola, leaping up from the bench.

'I, the Voyt, am telling you, just listen carefully ... Now, for one thing ...' But he did not finish expounding as Szymon began to shout across the whole table that the Jews had already marked the sold trees and would soon be felling. ⁸ They were waiting only for the frosts and the sleighs. ⁹

'Let them do their marking, they'll have to wait for the axing,' Boryna interrupted.

'We'll lodge a complaint at the commissioner's.'

'No, the commissioner's hand in glove with the squire. We'll go as a band, and chase off the loggers.'

'We'll not let 'em fell a single pine!'

'Take 'em to court!'

'Drink to me, Maciej – this is no time for conferring! A drunken man'll threaten God himself!' called the miller, topping him up. This line of talk and threats was not to his taste, since he'd come to an understanding with the Jews and was to saw the wood at his mill.

They drank up and rose, for preparations were beginning for supper and all the crockery was being brought in and arranged.

But the farmers did not quit the subject of the wood; it was far too stinging a wound. They huddled together in a group and, lowering their voices, out of the miller's hearing, they consulted and agreed to gather at Boryna's and make a plan ... They did not finish, though, for Ambrozy came in and joined them straight away. He was late – he'd been to visit a sick man with the priest three villages away, at Krosnowo – and hence keen to catch up with the drinking ... He did not succeed, however, for the older women began to chorus:

*'Come hither, groomsman, come around;
Invite the folk to sit them down!'*

To which the groomsman, clattering the benches, cried:

*'We've done it already – here they sit.
Bring 'em something good to eat!'*

And slowly folk began to occupy the benches behind the tables.

First came the newly married couple, of course, and after them, on both sides, people were seated in order of rank and fortune and age, right down to the bridesmaids and children. There was barely room to squeeze everyone in, though three walls were lined with tables.

Only the musicians did not sit down, nor the groomsman, who were helping to serve.

The hubbub subsided, the organist stood and prayed aloud – with only the blacksmith responding, for he, it seemed, knew Latin, and then they drank a toast to good health and appetite.

The cooks and groomsman began to bring in great steaming dishes of food and they sang out:

*'Here comes broth and rice –
Chicken in a trice!'*

And bringing in the second dish, they sang:

*'Peppered salty chitlings –
Come and eat 'em quickly!'*

The band, meanwhile, sat by the chimney and quietly played all manner of tunes to make the meal pleasant. They ate decorously, slowly, almost in silence, for hardly anyone said a word. Only the sounds of munching and scraping of spoons filled the chamber, and when they'd eaten a little and satisfied their initial hunger, the blacksmith sent the bottle round again, and then they began to talk quietly, addressing each other across the tables.

Only Jagna seemed to eat nothing. Boryna pressed her in vain, put his arm about her as if she were a child and coaxed her, but not a morsel of meat could she swallow, for she was hot and greatly weary. All she would take was a sip of beer and let her eyes wander about the room as she listened vaguely to Boryna's whispers.

'Are you content, Jagna, eh? My beauty mine! Never fear, Jagna, all will be well for you with me, just as well as at your mother's ... You'll be mistress of the house, Jagna, mistress ... I'll take on a girl for you so you'll not have to work too hard ... you'll see!' he murmured quietly, and looked lovingly into her eyes, taking no notice of anyone, so that they mocked him openly.

'Like a cat at the crackling.'

'Well, ain't she plump, like the best of 'em!'

'The old man's twirling and hopping like a cockerel!'

'He'll have fun, the old scoundrel, he will!' called the Voyt.

'Like a dog in the frost,' grunted old Szymon tartly.

They burst out laughing, and the miller almost lay down on the table, banging his fist in amusement.

The cooks sang out again:

*'Here come basins of nice fat millet,
So the lean can have their fill of it!'*

'Hey Jagna, this way – let me tell you something!' said the Voyt, leaning behind Boryna, beside whom he sat, and pinching her side. 'Ask me to be godfather!' he called, laughing, running his greedy eyes over her, for she was greatly to his taste.

She blushed deeply, at which the women burst out laughing, and fired away with their mockery and pointed jokes and advice as to how to manage your husband!

'Be sure to warm the quilt by the stove every evening.'

'Don't stint with the fat, and he'll have strength aplenty.'

'And flatter him, put your hands often about his neck.'

'And hold the reins gentle – he won't even notice where you're leading him!'

So counselled one after another, as was the usual way of women when they'd had a drink and their tongues were set free.

The chamber was shaking with laughter, and the talk so loosened that the miller's wife began to urge them to spare a thought for the young lasses and children, and the organist too argued that it was a great sin to sow scandal and set a bad example.

'For,' he preached, 'the Lord Jesus and the holy apostles commanded, as is all written down in the Latin books, clear as day, that 'tis better to kill than to corrupt, for if you corrupt such an innocent, it is verily as though you did it unto me. So Holy Scripture has it – for intemperance in drink or food, as in deeds, will be severely punished. I, dear people, say this to you,' he slurred indistinctly, for he'd had more than one or two himself.

'That old bellows-blower wants to stop people's fun.'

'Rubs shoulders with the priest and thinks he's a saint!'

'He can stuff his capote in his ears!'

So flew unfriendly voices, for he was not much liked in the village.

'Today's a wedding – it's no sin to have a bit o' fun and a laugh at something merry and enjoy yourselves. I, the Voyt, am saying so, dear people.'

'Jesus himself went to weddings and drank wine,' Ambrozy piped up gravely, but quietly, for he was drunk already. As he was sitting at the end, near the door, no one heard him, for everyone had begun to talk and laugh and clink glasses and to eat more slowly, to be sure of getting their fill. Many a guest had loosened their belt and was leaning back to squeeze more in ...

The cooks began to circulate with new dishes, singing:

*'It's grunted, it's squealed, in the garden it's rootled,
And now it's repaying its masters the trouble!'*

'Ho ho, they've really gone to town!' people marvelled.

'Indeed, a wedding costing a thousand zlotys ...'

'Well worth it – didn't he sign over six morgen!'

'They're celebrating on wrongs done to the children.'
 'And there's Jagna, sitting like a mope.'
 'But Maciej's eyes are shining like a lynx's!'
 'Why, he's good as dust, m'dear, dust!'
 'It'll end in tears yet.'
 'He's not the kind to cry, he'll reach for a stick first ...'
 'That's what I said to the Voyt's wife when she told me about the betrothal.'
 'Why is she not here?'
 'When she's due any day ...'
 'I'd stake my own hand that before long, soon as there's music back at the inn, Jagna'll be chasing after the lads.'
 'Mateusz is just waiting for that!'
 'Is he, now?'
 'Indeed! Wawrzon's wife heard what he was saying in the inn.'
 'Because he wasn't asked with his flute?'
 'The old man wanted it, but Dominikowa was against – doesn't everyone know what happened?'
 'Everyone's saying, but did anyone see?'
 'Would they talk for the sake of it!'
 'Bartek Koziol spied 'em in the wood back in spring ...'
 'Koziol's a thief and a swindler. Old mistress Pacześ accused him of taking a pig and he's talking out of spite ...'
 'There are others with eyes that see ...'
 'It'll end badly, mark my words ... Aye, it's nothing to me, but I think Antek and his family have been wronged and it cannot go unpunished.'
 'Surely, the Lord's not quick to act, but he's just ...'
 'There's been talk of Antek too, that they've been seen together here and there, colluding ...'
 They lowered their voices and the gossip grew more malicious, mercilessly scrutinizing the entire family, not sparing even the old woman, and pitying the boys the most.
 'Well, ain't it a sin! Lads full grown – Szymek's going on thirty and she won't let him marry, won't let him out the house and gives him hell over any old thing.'
 'Shameful it is, those lads, all doing women's work ...'
 'God forbid Jagna should dirty her hands!'
 'And they've five morgen apiece and could marry already!'
 'And that many girls in the village!'
 'And your Marcycha's been waiting longest, and her with a plot next to theirs!'
 'You better watch your Franka, before she gets more than she bargained for with Adam!'
 'The old woman's a hellcat and no mistake, but the boys are dolts and ninnies.'
 'Great big lads, and scared to let go of Mother's skirts!'
 'Oh, they will ... Why, look at Szymek today, trailing after Nastka Gołębianka.'
 'Their father was the same, I remember well, and the old woman no better than Jagna at her age!'
 'The apple don't fall far from the tree! Like mother, like daughter!'

The music stopped and the players went to eat at the other side of the cottage, for supper had ended. It suddenly became quiet as church during the Elevation – but in a moment, an even greater clamour erupted, a proper commotion, with everyone talking at once, shouting and arguing across the tables, so that now they could barely hear each other.

Finally, a few chosen guests were served *krupnik*,¹⁰ flavoured with honey and roots, while the rest enjoyed generous glasses of fruit-flavoured spirits and beer.

Hardly anyone paid heed to what they were drinking, for they were groggy and replete by then. They sat wherever convenient, unfastening their capotes in the heat, and sprawled over the tables. They hammered with their fists until the bowls skipped, seized each other about the waist or by the lapels, hugged each other around the neck, and told their woes as brother to brother, as a true Christian neighbour to another.

'It's a bad old world! Aye! Nothing for man but ruin and misery.'

'Get lost, damn you ...' Under the tables, the dogs were chewing on bones.

'... The only consolation's neighbour meeting neighbour to parley over a glass, tell your troubles, forgive whatever one or other's guilty of, aye, not which crop your cattle's snaffled or ploughing beyond a boundary, for the law knows already and witnesses'll confirm whose is the wrong and whose the justice, but it's the griefs between neighbour and neighbour, some creature loose in the orchard, the women disputing, or the children scrapping as sometimes happens ... Why, a wedding's for soothing bitterness and prompting peace and brotherhood between folk!'

'If just for the wedding, for that one day!'

'And tomorrow will come of its own accord. *Hej!* You'll not escape fate, not till the day you're under holy ground. It'll come, all right, grab hold, set a yoke on your shoulders, force you onward in your misery, and you must bear it, people, in blood and sweat, mind what's yours, and don't loosen your grip for the wink of an eye, or you'll find yourself caught under the cartwheels!'

'The Lord Jesus made men to be brothers, and here they are, wolves one to the other!'

'Not wolves, no – it's poverty goads 'em, provokes and sets 'em at each other, baring their teeth like dogs over a gnawed bone!'

'Not just poverty. It's the Evil One casting a shadow over folk, so they cannot recognize what's good and what's bad!'

'True, true, and blows upon the spirit as on embers, till greed and anger and all the sins are kindled!'

'Aye, he who's deaf to the Commandments, he does willingly listen to the music of hell!'

'Weren't always this way! There were obedience, respect for the elders, and accord!'

'And everyone had a bit o' land to work, and meadows, pasture, a wood.'

'And who'd ever heard of taxes then?'¹¹

'Or did anyone buy wood? He went off to the forest and took as much as were needed, even the best pine or oak! What was the manor's was the peasant's too.'

'Now it's neither manor's nor peasant's – Jewish it is, or worse.'

'Scum! I drank to you, now you drink to me! Made themselves properly at home, they have. Well, drink up, your good health and mine – let there be justice in all things ...'

'Those lousy squires! Over to you! Vodka's no sin, but taken proper, with brothers, then it's good for the health, clears the blood and flushes out disease!'

'If you're drinking, let it be a quart, and if you're celebrating, let it be all Sunday long. And have you work at hand? Work hard, don't spare your gams and put your shoulder to it! And if the occasion arises – be it a wedding, christening, someone passing – indulge yourself, rest, observe the custom and be merry. And if things go wrong – your wife takes sick, your cow dies, a fire breaks out – it's God's will and don't you oppose it, for what good can your shouting and crying do, you poor devil? None; you'll only lose your peace of mind, so that even food will be as nettles in your mouth! Suffer it and trust in the mercy of the Lord Jesus ... If worse befalls you – the Grim Reaper grabs you by the throat and looks you in the eye – don't try to give him the slip, it's not in your power. Everything's in God's hands ...'

'Aye, who can tell when the Lord Jesus will say: "Thus far is yours – from here is mine, O man."'

'Aye, just so! God's commands come from above like lightning, and no one, not even a priest, even the cleverest, can foresee 'em, till they tumble like ripe wheat about your ears.'

'And your business, man, is but one thing: to do your part and live as Holy Scripture commands, and don't peer ahead ... The Lord Jesus is preparing each one's wages and will pay honestly, what each is due ...'

'Thus have our Polish folk always lived – so it must be unto the ages of ages. Amen!'

'And their patience will breach the very gates of hell.'

So they conversed together, drinking without pause and each one telling what weighed on his heart and what had long stuck like a fishbone in his throat! Ambroz was loudest and most talkative of all, aye, though few listened, for each had his own piece to say, paying little mind to the rest ... The chamber was buzzing and hotter than ever when Ewka and Jagustynka came in, ceremoniously bearing a decorated ladle. A musician came fast on their heels and played the fiddle while they sang:

*'Slow, slow,
 Round the tables we go!
 For the victuals – groszy two;
 For the relish – ten will do.
 All the cooks are thanking you!'*

Folk were sated, convivial, their hearts softened with good food and plentiful drink, so that one or two threw even silver coins into the ladle.

They all began to heave themselves up from the table and slowly to disperse: some for a brief snatch of fresh air, while others paused in the room or hallway and continued their talk; some caught each other in friendly embraces, and several tottered, scraping heads against walls or butting folk like rams – which was no wonder, since supper had been well laced with vodka.

Only the Voyt and the miller were left behind at table, arguing vehemently and ready to fly at each other like a pair of hawks, until Ambrozy tried conciliating them with vodka. 'You watch the church porch, you old beggar, and keep your nose out of farmers' business,' snarled the Voyt.

Ambrozy retreated morosely. Pressing his bottle to his chest and dragging his leg noisily, he went looking for a likely suspect for a friendly drink and talk.

The young, meanwhile, had spilled into the farmyard or on to the road, arms about each other, to chat and romp – until the place pounded with chasing and noise. It was a clear night, the moon hung above the pond and shone so bright that even its faintest rings were visible, expanding as though light were striking the water, and rippling in the silence like coiled snakes. A frost was taking hold, clods cracked underfoot and hoar frost bleached the roofs, sprinkling the ground with rime.

It was late, and the first cockcrow¹² rang out in the village.

Inside, meanwhile, order was being restored and preparations made for dancing.

Once the musicians had had a bite and a rest, they began to play quietly, summoning the merrymakers together.

They didn't need much bidding, but came pouring in, the fiddles enticing their feet, which came dancing of their own accord – in vain, however, for the lads still felt heavy after supper. One or two twirled about, then hurriedly escaped to the hallway to smoke or prop up the thick walls.

The women led Jagna into the storeroom. Boryna was sitting with Dominikowa in front of the cottage, and the older folk took up the benches and corners and conversed, so that only the girls were left inside, giggling together, but they soon tired of that and began to organize all manner of games to liven up the boys more quickly.

First they played 'Fox comes strolling down the street, without hands and without feet'. They began by dressing Contrary Jasiek, as he was nicknamed, as the fox, with his sheepskin inside out. He was slow-witted, a clod, a figure of fun in the village. A full-grown fellow, he still went about with his jaw hanging open, played with the children, wooed all the girls and was a proper fool, but being an only child with ten morgen he was invited everywhere. The hare, meanwhile, was Józia Borynianka.

How they laughed – dear Jesus!

At every step, Jasiek would spread his arms wide, then down he'd go to the floor like a log, especially as they set out deliberately to trip him up, while Józia hopped about so neatly, alert on her hind legs, her mouth twitching like a real live hare.

Next came 'Quail'.

Nastka Golebianka led. She'd twist and turn so rapidly about the room they could not catch her at all, though she'd dart straight into their arms, only to dance out of reach again.

And then they played 'Piggy'.

Last of all, one of the groomsmen, probably Tomek Wachnik, imitated a stork. He threw a cloth over his head, and stuck out a long stick from underneath as a beak and clattered so ingeniously, like a real stork, that Józia, Witek and the younger ones began chasing him, shouting:

*'Kle, Kle, Kle,
Your mother's in hell!
What's she doing there?
Making noodles for the bairns.
What was her sin?
She starved and did 'em in!'*

And they scattered with shouts, and hid in the corners of the room like partridges, while he pursued, pecked and beat them with his wings.

The chamber shook with their laughter, screams and chasing.

The fun continued for a good hour, until the eldest groomsman signalled for quiet.

The women were leading Jagna from the storeroom, veiled in a white sheet. They sat her in the middle of the room on a kneading trough covered with a quilt. The bridesmaids leapt forward as though to capture her, but the boys and older men defended her, so they clustered together opposite, and began to sing in tearful, plaintive voices:

*'Gone away, gone!
Your wreath is no more –
In a coif you'll be wound,
By a bonnet be bound.'¹³*

Then they unveiled her.

She was already wearing a bonnet over her thick coiled plaits, but seemed even more beautiful in this array because she was all merry smiles and her shining eyes danced over everyone in the room.

The music played slowly and all the folk gathered, young and old, even the children, to sing a 'hop-song' with one great happy voice. And after the singing, the housewives alone led her into the dance.

Jagustynka, who'd had a bit to drink already, put her hips on her hips and began to sing at her:

*'Oh, had I but known,
Oh, for a widower you'd go,
Oh, I'd have woven you a wreath,
Oh, of juniper alone!'*

And other even more cutting and stinging verses.

But no one heeded her, for the musicians were playing furiously with all their might and folk leapt to the dance. The whole room suddenly boomed as though a hundred flails were beating a threshing floor as they came in, joining the hopelessly tangled throng, one after another, pair after pair, cheek to cheek, faster and faster – their capotes flying behind them, swaying broadly, stamping their heels, shaking their hats. Someone burst into song, and the lasses chorused '*Da dana*', twirling even faster, swinging to the rhythm in a dance so wild, so boisterous, spinning and frenzied, that it was impossible to recognize anyone in the crowd. For every tripping tune the fiddle struck, a hundred heels stamped on the floor, a hundred voices whooped and a hundred folk spun on the spot, as though whipped by a gale – so that the room was full of the sound of whirring capotes, woollen skirts and shawls fluttering like colourful birds.

The space of a prayer passed, of two, then three, and still they danced without reprieve, without a break. The floor thundered, the walls shook and the room seethed and roared, and still their ardour grew, like waters after a flood – surging and cascading about the room.

When they were done, all manner of rituals began, as is usual at a bonneting.

First, Jagna had to buy her way into the company of the other matrons!

A string of other ceremonies followed. Finally, the young men made a huge rope of unthreshed wheat into a great ring that the bridesmaids held carefully and guarded while Jagna stood in the middle: if someone wanted to dance with her, he had to approach, break in and romp in the ring, no matter how much they beat him with straw ropes wherever they could.

Finally, Wachnik and the miller's wives began the bonnet collection. First the Voyt threw a gold coin on to the plate, and a shower of silver roubles followed, paper notes flying like autumn leaves.

They collected more than three hundred zlotys!

It was a sizeable sum, but a trifle to Dominikowa; she had no regard for what came free, since she had plenty of her own, but that folk should so willingly trouble themselves for Jagna's sake disarmed her completely and she could not hold back the tears. She shouted to the boys to bring vodka, and began to serve it herself, taking a drink too and kissing her friends through flowing tears.

'Drink up, neighbours! ... Drink up, dear people, brothers mine! ... My heart is full of springtime ... to Jagna's health ... just one more glass ... one more ...' The blacksmith followed her with another toast and the lads too raised their own – for there was a fine crowd. Jagna herself again thanked all for their kindness and clasped the knees of the elders among them!

A hubbub arose in the room as glasses passed freely from hand to hand and everyone glowed with warmth and delight! Faces grew flushed, eyes shone and heart reached out to heart in brotherly love, in neighbourly goodwill. *Hej!* Sink or swim, what is there in life for man but this joy he can share sometimes with his brother, to feast a little and forget the world! The Grim Reaper alone comes to fetch us one at a time, but to a wedding all must go as a happy band and the whole company rejoice together. They crowded in, drinking and debating merrily, each one loudly holding forth, so that none could hear the other, but as all felt the same it did not matter, and a single joy united and suffused them all!

Whosoever has sorrows, set them aside for the morrow, enjoy the day, revel in friendship, cheer your soul! Just as the Lord Jesus grants the holy earth rest after the summer's harvest, so are folk granted rest in autumn, when they have worked their due in the field. And when your ricks are full of hay and the barn is full of wheat, precious as gold, awaiting only the flail, then revel after your summer toil, your labours, your drudgery!

So some reflected together, while others recounted all their griefs and troubles. Meanwhile, others still, who could see beyond their own cow's tail or the lice on their heads, gathered around old Szymon and reminisced about times past, fresh wrongs, taxes and matters touching the whole community, not to mention a quiet word or two concerning the Voyt's affairs.

Boryna did not join any group, but went from one to the other, his eyes following Jagna constantly, preening himself mightily that she was such a beauty. He kept tossing zlotys to the musicians to dissuade them from sparing their bows, since they were playing quietly and resting.

Suddenly, the instruments roared an *obertas*,¹⁴ setting bones ashiver. Boryna sprang towards Jagna, clasped her tightly and launched into such a jig the floorboards squealed. He'd swing down the room, and back again, his metal-tipped heels ringing; he'd twirl, plunge down on one knee, then fling himself right across the room, from wall to wall; he'd burst into song and the musicians would take it up, and on he'd dash with verve, leading the dance with passion. And in his wake other couples sprang from the crowd and began to stamp and sing and spin, and all with ever-greater speed so that it seemed a hundred spindles, full of yarn of many colours, were twirling and clattering about the chamber, spinning so fast no eye could tell if they were man or woman – nothing but a rainbow that someone had spilled and whipped to a whirlwind so that its colours played and shimmered and reeled faster and more furious and frenzied, until at times the rush of movement blew out the lamps, plunging the dancers into night, while splintered streaks of moonlight poured through the windows, a twinkling tide of silver across the darkness and the twirling human throng, which surged forwards on the froth of a singing wave, flickering and swirling in the moonbeams like a vision in a dream and vanishing back into impenetrable shadow, to emerge once more and flash across the opposite wall, where flames of light were caught spluttering and spraying in the glazed pictures, and roll past to tumble into night again, so that only the broken sound of heavy gasps, stamping and cries mingled and rang out in the darkened room.

And now the dances stretched into one long chain, with neither break nor pause ... for as soon as the musicians struck up something new, folk would jump to their feet, draw themselves up straight as a forest and spring off with the force of a hurricane. The thwack of their heels echoed like thunderclaps, their glad cries shook the whole house as they threw themselves passionately, crazily, into the dance as though into storm and battle, to the death.

How they danced!

... Yon *krakowiak*, leaping, cavorting, set like studded belts with quick and tinkling tunes and skipping refrains, boisterous and full of laughter, full of festive melodies and exuberant, strong, mettlesome youth, and full of playful mischief, wild pursuit and the ardour of young blood yearning for love. *Hej!*

... Yon mazurka, long as a baulk, branching like boundary pear trees, resonant and broad as the immeasurable plains, heavy but soaring, wistful but brazen, longing but audacious, gliding but stern, dignified but bellicose and intractable, like peasants massed close as a lofty forest who hurl themselves into the dance with such cries and vigour that a hundred, nay a thousand, would set upon and conquer the world entire, trounce it, trample it, smash it to smithereens, crush it with their heels and even perish themselves, but carry on dancing to the other side of death, clicking their heels in the mazurka with shrill shouts of '*Da dana!*'

... Yon spinning *obertas*, quick, snatched, giddy, wild, frantic, jaunty and tender, spirited and wistful, threaded with a mournful tune, throbbing with the heat of fiery blood, yet full of loving and kindness; like a sudden thundercloud, yet full of heartfelt voices, of deep-blue glances, springtime breezes, fragrant southing and blossoming gardens; like the songs of fields in springtime, so that a tear flows through laughter and the heart sings with joy and the soul aches with longing for those wide expanses, distant forests, and sets out dreaming into the whole wide world, singing: '*Da dana!*'

So dance followed indescribable dance.

Thus do the peasant folk make merry at the proper time.

Such were the revels at the wedding of Jagna and Boryna!

Hour after hour flew by and vanished without trace among rumpus and cries, in noisy delight and the abandon of dance, so that they barely noticed the light filtering from the east or the slow trickling of dawn's first rays blanching the night sky. The stars grew pale, the moon waned and a wind rose. It wafted from the forest and seemed to blow away the thinning darkness. Twisted, tousled trees peered through the windows, bowing their sleepy frosted heads, and still the house sang and danced!

It was as though meadows and harvest fields and orchards in bloom had gathered for Yuletide and, snatched up by a gale, had set off together on a long, giddy, fiery procession!

They'd thrown the doors wide open, the windows too. The house heaved with noise and lights; it throbbed, shook, rattled, groaned and revelled all the more, so that trees, people, earth and stars, the fences and the old house and every single thing was wrestling, clenched and tangled together. And drunk, blinded, oblivious, frenzied, it staggered from wall to wall, from chamber to hallway, flowed from hallway on to the road, from the road to the great fields, the forest, and into the wide world it went, in a whirl of dancing, tumbling and wheeling, and vanished in an unbroken, flickering chain towards the glimmer of the rising dawn.

It was the music that led them, that playing, those tunes ...

The bass viols boomed out the rhythm and hummed like spinning tops, and the flute carried the tune; whistling cheerfully it twittered, frolicking and goading the tabour, which hopped comically, with a riot of tiny cymbals, gambolling and trembling like a Jew's beard in the wind, and then a fiddle took over, going ahead, like the best dancer, singing high and loud at first, as though testing its voice, and then with the bow drawn in wide and poignant strokes, sad as the whimpers of a poor waif sobbing at the crossroads, until everyone spun on the spot and suddenly stopped, with a curt, sharp, flickering sound, as though a hundred heels had struck at once and a hundred peasants had cried out at the top of their lungs, so that it snatched your breath away and a shiver ran through you, and instantly there was wheeling, singing, turning, doubling back, scuttering, skipping, laughing and making merry so that warmth filled hearts and desire turned heads like vodka ... and again the fiddles took up that yielding tune, mournful and drenched in tears like dew – that dearest, that most heartfelt of our tunes, drunk with love and vigour – and launched into that brisk and furious Mazovian dance.

Dawn was slowly brightening, the lamplight paled and a hazy, grimy gloom pervaded the chamber, but still they rampaged with all their hearts and any who lacked refreshment sent to the inn for vodka, sought company and drank themselves into a stupor.

Those who'd left were gone, those who'd grown tired, rested, and those who'd got drunk, slept on the bench outside or in the hallway; others, meanwhile, the utterly dog-tired, lay under the fences, or anywhere, willy-nilly, while the rest danced till they dropped ...

The more sober were huddled by the door, beating time on the floor and singing:

'Get ready, merry guests, it's time to go!

Long road,

Deep water,

The forest black!

Get ready, merry guests, it's time to go!

We'll dance once more,

And on the morrow we'll be back

For a snack!

But no one was listening!

CHAPTER 12

It was dawn when Witek was banished home by Jagustynka and ran off, exhausted with merrymaking.

The whole village slumbered on, buried in deep dark shadows, spread low over the ground in a dense, thinning drift. The pond lay lifeless, engulfed by the dusky thicket of trees along its banks and so sunk in gloom that only in the very middle did it shuck off the night a little, like an eye dimmed by a cataract.

A hard frost was taking hold. Cold gusts of wind curdled the air, scraping nostrils and snatching the breath away. The ground rang beneath people's feet and the frozen puddles turned blue along the road like shattered blinded spectacles. The world paled slowly in the dawn as it surfaced, hoary, out of the murk in dull frozen silence; only a dog barked sleepily here and there, the mill clattering in the distance, and from Dominikowa's cottage came the sound of the wedding party clamouring still, echoing at a good stone's throw.

In Boryna's room a light still shone, like a little glow-worm. Glancing through the window, Witek saw old Roch sitting at the table, piously singing hymns from a book.

The boy edged quietly to the byre and began to grope for the latch when he suddenly leapt back with a scream as a dog threw itself yelping at his chest.

'Łapa! Łapa! You're back, doggy, you've come back, old boy!' he cried, recognizing the animal, and fell to his knees on the threshold with joy. 'Are you hungry, you skinny beggar, eh?'

He found some sausage in his bosom, saved from the wedding, and pressed it to the dog's mouth, but Łapa wasn't eager for the food and only barked, jumping at the boy and whimpering with delight.

'They starved you, poor thing, and sent you packing!' he whispered, opening the door to the byre and throwing himself just as he was on to his pallet. 'I'll protect you now, and look after you ...' he muttered, burrowing into the straw, and the dog lay down beside him, growling and licking his face.

Both quickly fell asleep.

From the stall alongside, Kuba called out in a weak sickly voice. He called for a long time, but Witek was sleeping like a stone, until Łapa, recognizing the voice, began to bark furiously and pull at the boy's capote until he roused him.

'What?' Witek muttered through his sleep.

'Water! I'm burning up ... water!'

Though disgruntled and tormented by drowsiness, Witek brought him a full bucket and placed it close by for him to drink.

'I'm so ill I can scarce breathe ... what's that growling?'

'It's Łapa! Dog's come back from Antek's!'

'Łapa!' he whispered, groping for the dog's head in the dark, and Łapa leapt about and barked and scrambled to climb on to the bunk.

'Witek, give the horses some hay, for their teeth are ringing against the empty manger, and I cannot move. Are they dancing still?' he asked a moment later, when the boy had rolled some hay down from the loft and pushed it into the rack.

'Happen they'll stop by noon. Some of 'em are that drunk they're lying in the road.'

'They're revelling, the farmers, that they are,' Kuba said with a deep sigh. 'Were the mill lot there?'

'They were, but soon left.'

'Lots of folk?'

'Could you even count 'em? House were overflowing.'

'And a fine spread?'

'Like some manor. Whole basins of meat they brought out, and the vodka, the beer, the mead! There were three kneading troughs full o' sausage alone.'

'When's the move?'¹

'Today before supper.'

'They'll enjoy themselves plenty and make merry yet ... My Jesus, and there was I thinking I'd chew on a bone and have my fill to eat at least the once, and look at me, just lying here and dying and listening to others having fun.'

Witek went off to sleep.

'If I could but feast my eyes ... if only ...'

Kuba fell silent, spent, ruminating over his sorrows, and quiet, diffident reproaches struggled in his breast, like small weary birds, cheeping painfully.

'Good health to 'em. Let them, at least, live a little,' he thought, stroking the dog's head.

Feeling more and more befogged by fever, he began to whisper a prayer to drive it off, fervently commending himself to the mercy of the Lord Jesus for good or for ill, but he kept forgetting the words. Sleepiness overwhelmed him, and the litany of whispers, swollen with pleas and tears, would break and spill like a string of red beads. He wanted to gather them up, he could see them so clearly, rolling about his sheepskin, but he forgot everything, and slipped away ...

Sometimes he woke, gazed about vacantly and, recognizing nothing, fell back again, plunged into a lifeless, deathly darkness.

Or again he would groan and cry out so in his sleep that the horses began to snort and tug at their tethers and he'd come round a little and raise his head.

'Jesus, if I could just last till day!' he moaned in terror and strained to look outside through the little window for a sign of daylight: he sought the sun in the cold grey sky, studded with pale stars

...

But day was still far off.

The stable was plunged in the haziness of first light so that the outlines of the horses were just beginning to emerge, and the hayracks, like ribs under the little windows, began to glint in the dimness ...

He could no longer drop off now, for new pains came, sliding into his leg like gnarled sticks, boring, tearing and stinging as though someone were showering his wounds with fire, so that he suddenly started and began to yell at the top of his lungs until Witek woke and came running.

'I'm dying now! I'm dying! It hurts so bad, the sickness is growing in me, choking me ... Witek, run for Ambrozy ... Oh Jesus, or call Jagustynka ... maybe they'll think of something, for I can't stand it ... my last hour's coming ... it's the end ...' he burst out in terrible weeping, burying his face in the straw and sobbing with misery and fear.

And Witek, sleepy though he was, ran to the wedding.

They were still dancing away, but Ambrozy was already his usual drunken self. Standing in the road directly in front of the house, he staggered from the pond to the fences, singing.

In vain did Witek plead and tug at his sleeve. The old wretch seemed not to hear and didn't know what he was doing, but only reeled and sang the same tune over and over with abandon.

He ran for Jagustynka, since she had knowledge of ailments too, but the old woman was sitting with her friends in the storeroom and all so busy knocking back *krupnik*, indulging themselves with beer, and so deep in talk and screeching songs, there was no way to get a word to her. Again and again he whimpered that she should go to Kuba, so that in the end she threw him out of the door and even gave him a taste of her fist for the road. He ran off to the stable crying, with nothing gained.

And since Kuba had just that moment dropped off, he burrowed into the straw, pulled his rags over his head and slept.

He was woken well past breakfast time by the mooing of the hungry un milked cows and Jagustynka raising merry hell, for, having overslept like the rest, she was making up for it now by shouting while setting about the chores.

Only when she'd got some of the work under her belt did she look in on Kuba.

'Help me, give me counsel,' he begged quietly.

'Get wed to a young 'un and you'll soon be cured!' she began merrily, but as soon as she saw his blue and swollen face she quickly sobered. 'You've more need of the priest than the doctor!'

What can I tell you? Eh? I'd chant or cense you?² but what good will it bring? ... Seems to me you're sick unto death, to death itself.'

'I'm going to die?'

'It's in God's hands, but seems to me you'll not slip out of the Reaper's grasp.'

'I'll die, you say?'

'Shall we be sending for the priest, eh?'

'The father!' he cried out, astonished. 'The father, here, to me, to the stable? What are you thinking!'

'Why not? Made o' sugar is he, will he melt in the horse dung? A priest is for going wherever the sick ask for 'im.'

'Jesus! As if I'd dare – in this muck, for me?'

'Yer stupid as a ram!' She shrugged and left.

‘Stupid she is, she don’t know what she’s talking about,’ Kuba muttered, greatly appalled. He fell back heavily on the pallet and pondered a long time. ‘What’s the woman thinking ... ha, the dear reverend walks up and down rooms ... reads out o’ books ... talks wi’ God ... and he’s to come to me? ... Women – just want to wag their tongues ... stupid ...’

And so he remained alone, as though they’d quite forgotten him.

Witek looked in from time to time to top up the horses’ fodder or to water them, and would give him a drink too, but soon disappeared, running off for the wedding festivities that were starting up again at Dominikowa’s to take the bride to her new home. Sometimes Józka would burst in noisily, push him a piece of cake, twitter and prattle and fill the stable with clamour, until the chickens on the fences clucked in alarm and off she’d run hurriedly.

Indeed, she’d every reason, for the party was in full swing up there, the music boomed through the walls, along with merry shouts and singing.

Kuba lay quietly, for the pain was gripping him less often somehow, so he listened out for their disporting, talking to Łapa, who would not leave him for a moment, and together they ate Józia’s cake, or he clicked his tongue at the horses and talked to them. Neighing joyfully, they turned their heads from their mangers, and the filly even broke free of her halter and came over to the bunk to frolic and press her damp warm muzzle to his face.

‘You’re a skinny poor thing, you are!’ He stroked her tenderly and kissed her flaring nostrils. ‘Don’t you worry, I’ll soon be well, and then I’ll fatten up those flanks, with pure oats, even ...’

He soon fell silent, gazing mindlessly at the blackened knots in the wood from which streams of resin had trickled down the walls, like hardened tears of blood ...

The sunny but still muted day peeped between the chinks with quiet eyes, while through the door burst a wide flood of brightness, sparkling, flickering like golden cobwebs on the stubble where the flies buzzed languorously.

Hour trailed slowly after hour, like blind lame beggars trudging quietly and laboriously along harsh sandy roads, or like a stone that drops into a whirlpool and sinks, disappears, lost, undetectable even to the human eye.

A noisy twittering band of sparrows swooped into the stable and brazenly threw themselves upon the mangers ...

‘Right smart beggars!’ he whispered. ‘Nobbut a tiny bird and the Lord Jesus gives him wits to know where to forage. Quiet Łapa, let ’em eat and help themselves, poor things. Winter’ll come for them too.’ He hushed the dog who had leapt up to chase the pillagers.

The pigs began to squeal outside and rub against the corners of the byre until the stable walls shook, and then began to stick their long muddy snouts through the door and grunt.

‘Chase ’em out, Łapa! Old beggars, never have enough!’

Next came the chickens, clucking on the threshold, and a great red cockerel looked in tentatively, retreated, beat his wings and crowed, then leapt boldly over the doorstep to the baskets full of fodder. The rest came after, but they did not manage to eat their fill before a flock of honking geese arrived, hissing from the threshold with a flash of red beaks, their swaying white necks outstretched.

‘Chase ’em out, doggy, go on! They’ll bicker, the beggars, like women!’ And indeed, there was soon screeching, squealing, the beating of wings and feathers flying as from a ripped quilt, for Łapa did not hold back. He returned panting, his tongue hanging out, and yelping with delight.

‘Quiet now!’

The sound of Jagustynka’s irascible voice came from the house as she ran about, and the banging of wares being shifted from room to room.

‘They’re getting ready for the move!’

Someone trundled by on the road from time to time, though rarely, but now came the squeak of a cart; Kuba listened intently.

‘Kłab’s cart, one horse and hayrags – must be off to the forest for leaf litter. Aye, axle’s worn down at the front so the hub’s rubbing and creaking.’

Footsteps could still be heard echoing along the road – conversations, voices that hovered and trembled, and barely audible, barely detectable sounds – but he caught them in mid-flight and recognized them.

‘Old Pietras is off to the inn,’ he muttered. ‘Walentyna’s shouting ... someone’s goslings must’ve strayed to her side ... Hellcat, not a woman! That sounds like Kozioł’s wife, aye, running and yelling ... aye, it’s her!’ ... The Rafals’ Pietrek ... idiot’s tattling like he’s got a mouthful of noodles ... Priest’s mare is going to fetch water, yes ... and stopping ... cartwheels are sticking ... she’ll break her legs, that one.’

And so, slowly surmising, he felt his way in his thoughts and mind’s eye about the cottages, worrying and fretting, and sharing the tribulations of the whole village, so that he scarcely noticed the day trail by. The walls dimmed, the doors faded and the stable began to darken. It was almost evening when Ambrozy came, still not sober, for he was staggering and speaking so fast it was hard to make him out.

‘Sprained your leg?’

‘Take a look and tell me.’

In silence, Ambrozy unwound the bloodied cloth, dried and stuck to the leg so that Kuba began to shriek to high heaven.

‘A lass in labour squeals less!’ he muttered mockingly.

‘Well it hurts! ... Just don’t yank it! Jesus!’ Kuba almost howled.

‘You’ve been butchered right and proper! Did a dog savage your leg or what?’ Ambrozy cried in astonishment, for the calf was mauled and festering, the leg swollen as a barrel.

‘It’s ... but don’t go telling ... woodsman shot us ... only ...’

‘True ... there’s pellets like poppy seeds under the skin ... Did he shoot from far off? Ho, ho! Your leg’s fair useless now ... nobbut bare bones scraping together ... Why didn’t you call me straight off?’

‘I were scared ... if they found out I’d gone for a hare ... I shot one ... I were back in the fields already ... when he lets me have it ...’

‘Woodsman’s been saying in the inn that someone were up to mischief ...’

‘Ha ... mischief ... as though hares belong to anyone ... scum ... he ambushed me ... I were on the field already, and he lets rip with both barrels ... the devil ... but don’t you say nothing ... they’ll take me to court ... the gendarmes ... they’d snaffle the gun quick ... it’s not mine ... I were thinking it would heal of its own accord ... Help me, it’s throbbing terrible, it hurts so bad ...’

‘So that’s your game! A right dark horse, a right *lelum polelum*,³ and here he is sharing hares with the squire⁴ ... Well, I’ll be! ... You’ll pay for that fellowship with your leg ...’

He examined it again, greatly troubled.

‘Too late, much too late!’

‘What’s to do, what’s to do,’ Kuba moaned, terrified.

There was no reply. Ambrozy just rolled up his sleeves, took out a sharp penknife, grasped the leg firmly and began prising out the pellets and squeezing out the pus.

Kuba immediately bellowed like a slaughtered beast and did not quieten till Ambrozy stuffed his sheepskin in his mouth, and then he fainted with the pain. Ambrozy cleaned the leg, smeared it with ointment and wrapped it in clean rags, before bringing him round.

‘You must go to hospital ...’ he muttered quietly.

‘Hospital?’ Kuba was still only semi-conscious.

‘They’ll cut off your leg, then you might recover.’

‘My leg?’

‘Aye, it’s no good now, rotten, black all over.’

‘Cut it off?’ he asked, unable to understand.

‘At the knee. Don’t worry, a bullet got me right in the thigh and I’m alive.’

‘So they’d cut off the aching bit and I’d be well?’

‘Like lifting it away ... but you’ve got to get to hospital now ...’

‘No, I’m frightened, no ... the hospital ...’

‘Idiot!’

‘They cut you up alive there ... You do it, cut what’s needed ... I’ll pay whatever you like, cut it off ... but not the hospital ... I’d rather croak here ...’⁵

‘Then you will ... only a doctor can do it. I’ll go to the Voyt now, get a cart⁶ for tomorrow and take you to town.’

‘Then you’ll go in vain. I’m not going to the hospital,’ he said firmly.

‘Ha, as if they’ll consult you, idiot!’

‘Cut it off, soon get better ...’ Kuba repeated quietly after he’d left. His leg had stopped hurting after being cleaned and dressed, but was numb now as far as the groin, and his whole side felt as though ants were crawling along it. He ignored it, for he was deep in thought.

‘I’d get better! Has to be true – after all Ambrozy’s lost a whole leg ... walks with a crutch ... Like lifting it away, he says ... But Boryna’d chuck me out ... aye, a farmhand without a leg ... no use for the plough, nor any job. What’d I do? I could only mind the cattle or go out to beg ... into the world, next to a church somewhere ... like an old shoe on a rubbish heap ... to die under a fence. Merciful Jesus!’

He suddenly grasped it all clearly and almost sat up so filled was he with blinding dread.

‘Jesus! Jesus!’ he repeated feverishly, trembling all over in confusion.

He burst into great fits of miserable weeping, a cry of helplessness, tumbling into an abyss with no hope of rescue.

Kuba wailed and struggled a long time in his torment, but some kind of resolve began to stir amid the tears and grief, some deliberation. Slowly, he quietened, grew calmer, and sank so deep into himself that he heard nothing; music, singing and shouts nearby seemed to echo in the distance as though in a dream.

Meanwhile, the wedding party was heading for Boryna’s.

Jagna was moving to her husband's house.

A stout cow had gone ahead and a cart with the chest, quilts and various pots and dishes that she was bringing as part of her dowry.

Now, perhaps a prayer after sunset, when it was growing dark and the world had shrouded itself in mist, heralding a change, they piled out of Dominikowa's.

The musicians led the way with a lively tune, and next came Jagna, still dressed up in wedding clothes, led by her mother, her brothers and friends, with a throng of wedding guests bringing up the rear.

They went slowly round the pond, grown black in the smothering gloom, through ever-thickening mists, in the hush of the silent starless darkness, so that footsteps and music came in short muffled bursts as though from under water.

The young people hummed quietly. Now and then a woman would break into song or a lad cry, *'Da dana'*, but they soon fell silent, with little enthusiasm now and chilled to the bone in the damp air.

When they finally turned into the Boryna homestead the bridesmaids sang out:

*'The girl began to cry –
Such a wedding did they give her,
Four candles they lit for her,
The organ they played to her.
Did you think, O girl, that
For you they'd always play a song?
A little yesterday, a little today ...
Then cry your whole life long ...
Da dana! Cry your whole life long.'*

On the porch, Boryna, the blacksmith and his wife and Józka were already waiting at the threshold.

First came Dominikowa, carrying a chunk of bread in a bundle, a pinch of salt, a lump of coal, wax from a blessed candle and some ears of grain that had been blessed at the Assumption.

When Jagna crossed the threshold, the women followed, tossing loose threads and hurds of hemp to prevent the Evil One from gaining access to her and to ensure that all would go well.

Then there was greeting and kissing and wishing the couple happiness, good health and all that God might grant, and everyone went inside, soon filling every bench and corner.

The musicians tuned their instruments and strummed quietly in order not to disturb Boryna as he served refreshments.

He went from friend to friend with a full tankard, helping them to food, urging all to eat, embracing and toasting each person in turn. The blacksmith helped him on the other side of the cottage, and Józka helped Magda to carry plates of cake stuffed with honey and cheese, which she'd baked specially to welcome the bride and to gratify her father.

But the party was listless. Oh, no one was unwilling to drink or slow to take a glass, they even drank with gusto, but somehow the place lacked spirit and did not come to a boil but barely simmered, like water over a low flame. They sat morosely, moving heavily and awkwardly, chatting little and quietly; some of the older folk yawned stealthily, stretching and thinking longingly of the nearest patch of hay.

The women, meanwhile, though the tribe given to creating most din and merriment, merely sprawled about the benches, huddled in corners and chattered but little among themselves.

In her husband's storeroom, Jagna soon changed into ordinary clothes, though her best, and came out to entertain and receive her guests, but her mother would not let her touch a thing.

'Enjoy yourself, my girl! You'll have your fill of hard work yet, you will!' she whispered and pressed her to her breast again and again, hugging her tearfully, to the surprise of many, for it was not as though Jagna were leaving to follow a fellow to some other village or to a life of hardship.

They ridiculed such maternal tenderness with many a biting remark, for it was now, when Jagna had moved to her husband's cottage as mistress of the house, of so much land and all manner of property, that their eyes were opened, and envy clutched at the throat of many a mother of grown daughters, and the lasses too felt somehow ill at ease and gloomy.

They had gone to see the other side of the cottage – Antek's old place – where the fire was fair roaring as Ewka and Jagustynka prepared the supper, so that Witek could barely keep up fetching wood to feed it below the huge pans.

They drifted throughout the whole house, their envious eyes boring into every hole and corner.

How could anyone not envy such a fate?

The house itself was the best in the village: big, light, high, situated like some manor, whitewashed, with wooden floors, and clean! And what tools and wares, what dishes, at least twenty pictures, and glazed at that! And then the byres, stables, barn, shed! And the livestock? Five cows' tails, not counting the bull, which gave a fine profit! Three horses! Not to speak of the land? The geese? The pigs?

They sighed ruefully and one or other would say quietly:

'Dear Lord, that the good Jesus sees fit to benefit them that don't deserve it!'

'Knew how to help themselves, they did!'

'Aye, he gains who meets fate halfway.'

'Why didn't your Ułisia try?'

'Because she fears God and leads a decent life.'

'And so do the rest.'

'Folk won't let that one off easy. Let her but once meet some lad by night and tongues will be quick to wag.'

'That kind have all the luck ...'

'Shameless she is.'

'Come on now,' Jędrzych called. 'Music's playing and not a single skirt in the house, no one to dance with!'

'Hark how willing he is, and will your mother let you?'

'Take care not to lose your trews and flash your backside, if you're in such a hurry.'

'And watch you don't trip a body up!'

'Take Walentowa, that'll make a fine clumsy pair!'

Jędrzych just swore, grabbed the first girl at the end and led her off, ignoring the droning behind him.

They were dancing in the main room already, slowly as yet and without much zest; only Naska Gołębianka was cavorting wildly with Szymek Pacześ. They'd planned it in advance, so as soon as the music struck up, they paired off and danced away with glee; then they'd walk about the room to catch their breath, arms about each other's waists, and being drawn to each other they chatted merrily, laughing out loud and sauntering hip to hip, so that Dominikowa glanced anxiously at her son.

But it was not until the Voyt arrived – he was late after delivering recruits to the *powiat* – that people roused themselves, for as soon as he came in, as soon as he'd had a drink or too, he began bantering with his fellow farmers and mocking the 'young couple'.

'Groom's white as the wall, and the bride's as red as her skirt.'

'Say that tomorrow ...'

'You're no novice, Maciej – surely you've not wasted a day.'

'He's no gander, with all eyes upon him!'

'I wouldn't wager a pint on it! Throw a pebble in a bush and a bird will surely fly out; I, the Voyt, say so!'

They burst out laughing, for Jagna had scuttled away to the other side.

The women too were gabbling the first thing that came into their heads.

It soon grew noisy and cheered the soul. The Voyt did his bit, and the vodka helped too. Boryna did not stint and the bottle made many a round. The dancing went more briskly and more couples took to the floor; they began to sing, tap their feet and make an ever-bigger circle round the room. And then Ambroz appeared, sitting down at the edge, not far from the threshold, and following the bottle with greedy eyes.

'Your head only turns to where glasses are clinking!' threw in the Voyt.

'Because they're noisy, and credit to anyone who gives a thirsty man a drink!' the other retorted solemnly.

'Here's water, you old wineskin.'

'What's good for a beast brings harm to a man! They say: "Water'll save who it saves, but vodka will put everyone on their feet."'

'Have a drink, then, since you're so smart.'

'To you, Voyt! They also say: "Baptize with water, bless a wedding with vodka and a death with tears!"'

'A good saying, have another ...'

'Won't say no to a third! The first is always to my first wife, and my second to the one after.'

'Why's that?'

'Because she died in time for me to find a third.'

'Dreaming of women, but his eyes can scarce see once dusk sets in ...'

'I'd still grope my way with a stick in the dark to a woman's weakness!'

The room burst out with laughter.

'We'll match you with Jagustynka!' the women called.

'She likes vodka and has a mouth on her too,' others added.

'They say: "A hard-working chap and a lippy wife have every chance of a mighty fine life."'

The Voyt sat down beside him, and others perched nearby on benches if they could, or stood if not, huddled together and taking up half the room at least, ignoring the dancers.

Then the jokes began to fly, all manner of stories and flights of fancy, comic tales and fables, until the room shook with laughter, with Ambrozy in full flow. The old scoundrel held forth and fibbed through his teeth, but so astute and droll was he that they fell about with mirth. Nor would Wachnikowa be outdone in talk among the women, but played first fiddle, and the Voyt, too, chipped in, as much as his office allowed.

The musicians sawed away briskly, the young whooped it up, shouting and smartly clicking their heels and having so much fun together they were lost to the world, until someone saw Jankiel in the hallway. They soon pulled him into the room. The Jew took off his cap, bowed and greeted everyone amiably, ignoring the insults that were flying past his ears like stones.

'Yella fella! Unbaptized son of a mare!'

'Quiet there! Offer him something, give the man a vodka!' called the Voyt.

'I was passing by, so I thought I would see how you farmers enjoy yourselves. God bless, Mister Voyt – I'll take some vodka ... why should I not drink to the health of the happy couple!'

Boryna brought out the bottle and offered him a drink. Wiping the glass on his capote, Jankiel put on his cap, knocked the drink back and helped it down with another.

'Stay, Jankiel – you'll not need to eat *treyf*!' ² *Hej!* Musicians, a Jewish tune! Let Jankiel have a dance!' they called, laughing.

'I can have a dance, it's no sin!'

But before the musicians caught on, Jankiel had slipped quietly into the hallway and disappeared. He was off to see Kuba, to pick up the shotgun.

They did not even notice his departure, for Ambrozy never paused in his fooling, and Wachnikowa echoed him like a bass viol. And so they whiled the time away until supper. The music had quinked, the tables were arranged and bowls were clinking as they were set down, and still they joked.

In vain did Boryna invite them to sit – no one even heard. Then Jagna echoed repeatedly that they should come, whereupon the Voyt pulled her into the crowd, sat her next to him and held her by the hand.

At last Jasiek, known as Contrary, shouted loudly:

'Get to the bowls, people, food's getting cold!'

'Quiet, fool, you'll find a bowl to lick clean soon enough!' said Ambrozy.

'Ambrozy's spinning yarns like there's no tomorrow, but he's fooling no one ...'

'Jasiek, you take whatever's put in your mouth – that's yours – but don't you try it on with me, you'll get nowhere,' said Ambrozy.

'Come on then, let's see!' the lad yelled back, since he was dim-witted and did not grasp the other's meaning.

'An ox'd do as well as you, or better.'

'It's emptying the priest's chamber pot makes Ambrozy think he's so clever!'

'Let a calf into church and it'll come out no better than it went in! Stupid woman!' Ambrozy muttered, crossly.

It was Jasiek's mother who'd stepped in to defend her son. The latter was first to the table and the others quickly followed to take their seats, for the cooks were bringing in steaming basins and the aromas wafted about the room.

They sat according to seniority and as befitted a bridal reception, with Dominikowa and her boys in the middle. The bridesmaids and groomsmen sat together, side by side, and Boryna and Jagna remained on their feet to serve and supervise.

It was quiet, with only the children noisy beyond the windows, yelling and scuffling, and Łapa baying as he circled the house, clamouring to get in. Meanwhile, folk solemnly and silently tucked in, eagerly stabbing at the bowls heaped high, so that only the scraping of spoons could be heard and the tinkling of glasses in the raising of toasts.

Jagna, meanwhile, constantly urged everyone to take more, serving first one guest and then another with meat or some other morsel, and bidding them not to stint themselves. So deft was she, so apt and flattering a word did she have for everyone and so prettily did she coax them, that many a man followed her with eyes full of longing and her mother positively swelled with satisfaction, setting aside her soup simply to gaze on her with pleasure.

Boryna saw it too, for when she went to the cooks he flew after her, caught her in the hallway, pulled her close and kissed her forcefully.

'My dearest, my mistress of the house! You're like a manor lady, the fine way you carry yourself and manage!'

'Well, aren't I a housewife! Go on inside; Gulbas and Szymon are sitting there sullen and hardly touching a thing. Go toast them!'

Of course he listened and did as she wanted! And Jagna felt oddly merry at heart and glad. She suddenly felt herself to be the mistress of the house. And not just any house; she was almost a lady. The governing of it felt natural in her hands and her gravity grew with it, and a dignity full of strength and calm! Moving freely about the rooms, she saw to everything briskly and directed everything as cleverly as though she had been running the household for goodness knows how long.

'The old man'll find out soon enough what she's like and that's his lookout, but seems to me she'll be a fine housekeeper,' whispered Ewka to Jagustynka.

'Fine as any wench when the larder's full,' the other scoffed. 'It'll be all very well, till she gets sick of the old man and starts chasing after the lads ...'

'She won't do that, though there's Mateusz in reserve. He'll not give her up.'

'Eh ... he will! Someone'll make him ... they will.'

'Boryna?'

'Ha, Boryna! There's one stronger than the both of 'em ... there is ... You'll see for yourself when the time comes,' she said with a sly laugh. 'Witek, chase off the dog. It's barking and barking till my ears hurt, and scare off those boys before they shatter the windows and trample the winter straw.'

Witek jumped out with his crop. The dog fell silent, squeals were heard and the thud of the noisy horde as they fled. He chased them as far as the road and quickly returned, for a hail of mud and stones had come showering in his wake.

'Witek! Hey, wait!' called Roch, standing in the yard by the corner of the house, in the shadows. 'Call Ambrozy, tell him it's urgent – I'll wait on the porch.'

Not until a prayer later did Ambrozy emerge, cross to be interrupted while eating – and the best dish too, suckling pig and peas.

'Is the church on fire or what?'

'Don't shout! Come and see Kuba – I think he's dying.'

'Let him die, and not bother people eating! I was with him before supper and said he was to get ready for the hospital, so they could cut off his leg and he'd soon be well!'

'You told him that! Now I understand. I think he cut it off himself ...'

'Jesus, Mary! What do you mean, himself?'

'Come quick, you'll see. I was going to sleep in the byre and I'd just got to the yard when Łapa leapt at me, barking, whining, tearing at my capote with his teeth and tugging. I couldn't make out what he wanted ... then he runs ahead, sits at the entrance to the stall and whines. I go up and take a look. Kuba's lying hanging over the threshold, his head in the stall! I thought at first he'd wanted to get out for some air and had fainted! I carried him to the pallet and lit the lantern to look for water and I see he's covered in blood, white as the wall, and more blood's pouring from his leg. Quick, before he takes his last gasp ...'

They entered the stable and Ambrozy set about rousing him vigorously. Kuba lay limp, barely breathing and wheezing through clenched teeth, so that they had to prise them apart with a knife to pour some water down his throat.

His leg was hacked off at the knee, barely hanging on by the skin and bleeding copiously. Patches of blood were staining the threshold red, the axe lay bloodied and the grindstone that always stood by the stable eaves had been knocked over and was lying by the doorway.

'Aye, he's cut it off himself. He were afraid of the hospital – the idiot thought he could attend to himself, tough as nails, eh! Obstinate! Jesus, cutting off your own leg! Unbelievable! He's lost a lot of blood.'

Kuba suddenly opened his eyes and gazed about, quite lucidly.

'Is it off? I chopped it twice, but then I felt groggy,' he whispered.

'Does it hurt?'

'Not a bit. I used up every ounce of strength, but I'm better!'

He lay quietly and uttered no cry at all when Ambrozy arranged his leg, washed and bound it in soaked cloths.

Roch, on his knees, held up the lantern and prayed so fervently the tears ran down his face, but Kuba just smiled joyfully, tenderly and wistfully somehow, like a child abandoned in a field who, before realizing that his mother is gone, exults in the grass that murmurs above him, gazes at the sun, stretches out his hands to the birds flying overhead, babbles in his own way to everything, and is happy. That's how he felt now: he was content and calm and without pain, and his soul was light and joyful so that sickness meant nothing to him any more. And he quietly prided himself ... on how well he'd sharpened the axe ... on how he'd arranged his leg on the threshold ... and chopped right into the kneecap ... a stab of pain, but the leg hadn't given at a single blow ... so he hacked again with all his might and now nothing hurt him – it seemed to have helped ... If he had just a little more strength, he wouldn't fester any longer on this pallet, but would go to the wedding ... have a dance ... and a bite to eat, for he was hungry ...

'Lie still and don't move. You'll get something soon, I'll tell Józia.'

Roch stroked his face and went out into the yard with Ambrozy.

'He'll have given up the ghost by morning, he'll fall asleep quiet as a bird, his blood's all but drained away,' said Ambrozy.

'We should get the priest, while he's conscious!'

'But the priest's gone to Wola for the evening, to the manor.'
'I'll go for him, there's no time to lose!'
'It's a mile to Wola – you won't find it by night through the wood. There are horses here ready, theirs who are leaving after the supper. Take one and go.'
They led a horse out on to the road and Roch mounted.
'Don't you forget about Kuba – he should be watched!' he called as he moved off.
'I won't leave him alone, I shan't forget.'

But very soon he did forget; he took heed only to tell Józia about the food, and then he returned to the table, latched on to a bottle so tightly, so heartily, he quickly knew nothing of the whole wide world.

Józka, meanwhile, being an honest lass, gathered all she could in a bowl, poured a plentiful slug of vodka into a pint pot and bore it off gladly.

'Kuba, eat up quick, you can enjoy the wedding too!'

'God bless you! Strong sausage, I think – I can smell it.'

'Why, I brought it specially so's you could try it.' She pressed the bowl into his hand, for it was dark in the stable. 'Drink the vodka first.'

He drank every last drop.

'Sit with us a little, it's dull all alone ...'

He began to smack his lips, bite and chew, but could not swallow a thing.

'They're making merry, eh?'

'Such a wedding, so many people, I've never seen a bigger.'

'It's Boryna after all, so no surprise!' he whispered with pride.

'Aye, and Father's celebrating and forever after Jagna, all the time.'

'Well ... she's a beauty, lovely face, like a lady from the manor!'

'You know Dominikowa's Szymek is making up to Nastka Gołębiana.'

'The old woman won't allow it. There are ten mouths for three morgen at Nastka's.'

'She breaks 'em up whenever she finds 'em, true, and watches out sharp.'

'Is the Voyt here?'

'Making 'em laugh and mousing the most, along with Ambrozy.'

'Like he wouldn't be, at such a wedding, such a farmer! And Antek and his lot, what's up with them?' he asked quietly.

'Well, I dropped in, o' course, at dusk, took the children some meat and cake and bread ... He chased me out the house and threw what I'd brought after me ... He's proper stubborn, and mad, so mad ... and it's miserable poor at theirs and the crying ... Hanka just quarrels with her sister – they've all but pulled each other's hair out.'

He made no reply, but rubbed his nose hard, and seemed to breathe more heavily.

'Józia,' he said after a moment, 'the mare's groaning and been trying to lie down from evening. She must surely be close to birthing ... she needs watching. Needs watering. She's groaning so!

Poor thing, and I cannot help ... I'm terrible weak ... no strength at all ...'

He grew tired and fell silent, as though he were falling asleep.

Józka left hurriedly.

'Come hinny, come, come!' he called out, coming to.

The mare gave a drawn-out neigh and strained at her halter until the chains rang.

'I'll have a good feed for once, at least! You'll get your share, little dog, you will, don't whine ...'

He made to tuck into the sausage, but it was no good. He had no inclination for it and could not swallow.

'My Jesus, so much sausage, so much meat ... and I can't ... can't at all.'

He tried in vain, licked and sniffed it, but he couldn't. Letting his hand drop, he hid the sausage under the straw, not releasing his grip on it.

'My God, so much of it, I've never had as much in my life, and I can't eat.'

His heart sank with misery and the tears ran down his face. He cried bitterly until he was sobbing like a hurt child.

'I'll eat it later, I'll have a rest and then I'll have a feast,' he thought.

But later he couldn't either. He dropped off, still gripping the sausage, unaware that Łapa was quietly chewing it ...

He suddenly came to, for the music struck up with such force in the house after supper that the walls shook and set the frightened chickens clucking in the sties.

The din burst from the house like red fire into the dark night, crashing like thunderbolts around the stable.

The revels were brisk back there, laughter, merrymaking and fun, and time and again the ground thumped with the tramping of feet and girlish squeals rent the air.

Kuba listened at first, but quickly forgot about everything. Sleep overcame him and carried him off into a humming darkness, like a buzzing under water ... to the bottom of forests ravaged by a storm.

When the dancing grew even faster and more furious, with noise and clacking of heels and frenzied stamping so that it seemed the house would burst at the seams, he kept waking. Leaning out from the darkness, his soul drew back from oblivion, returning from ominous distances, and listened.

He tried to eat now and then and whispered a quiet, heartfelt:

'Come hinny, come, come!'

But his soul was slowly departing and straining to be off, like Jesus' little bird. Hovering in confusion, it still could not quite break free, and so clung to holy earth, to rest after its labours, to console its lonely weeping with the sound of human clamour. It reached for what was dearest, went back among the living, crying piteously to its brothers and begging hearts for help, until, fortified by Jesus' strength and mercy, it soared towards fields that seemed to be in springtime, the Lord's great fallows, immense, cocooned in eternal light, and the never-ending feast.

Higher it flew, higher and higher, to that place ...

... That place, where there is no more human weeping to be heard nor the mournful wail of any soul.

... Where only the scent of fragrant lilies wafts, where spring flowers murmur with honeyed sweetness, where starry rivers glide over brilliant colourful depths, in eternal day.

... Where only quiet prayers and endless drifts of fragrant smoke float like mist, bells tinkle and organs quietly play, and the holy sacrifice is forever offered, and folk, sinless now, and angels and saints sing God's praises together, in God's eternal, holy church! Where a human soul need only pray and sigh and weep for joy and rejoice for ever with the Lord unto the ages.

Thither did Kuba's tormented soul soar, longing for rest.

Back at the house, meanwhile, they danced and revelled, heart and soul, even more eagerly than the evening before, since the refreshments were even more lavish and their hosts even more insistent. They carried on dancing till they were fit to drop.

They were simmering like water on the boil, and should they flag but a little, the music thundered anew, and they merely bent like flax whipped by a gale, gathered momentum, drummed their feet and, with a shout, launched upon a new round of singing and heaving, riotous, fiery dancing.

Their souls had almost melted in the heat: their blood seethed, they were losing their minds, their hearts had utterly surrendered; every nerve thrilled to the beat, every movement was a dance, every cry a song, and every eye shone with mirth and delight.

And so it went all night, until daybreak!

The day rose heavy and quiet, the dawn unfurled sombre impenetrable banks of cloud and snow began to fall. The flutter of a few sparse flakes at first, wheeling like pine needles on a windy day, and then it began to come down in earnest.

The snow fell as though through a fine-mesh sieve. Down it came, straight and even, steadily; without a sound it covered roads, trees, fences and the whole land with a whitewashed, greyish yarn, or feathery down.

The wedding ended at last. They were to meet in the inn that evening for the after-party, but for now they dispersed to their homes. Only the groomsmen, bridesmaids and musicians gathered in a group before the porch to sing a final song with one voice:

*'Goodnight, newly-weds,
Goodnight!
A good night we wish to you,
And remain your servants true,
Goodnight!'*

And at that moment, Kuba laid his soul to rest at the holy feet of the Lord.

PART II

WINTER

CHAPTER I

Winter was approaching ...

Still tussling with autumn, it rampaged, bellowing in the blue distances like a fierce and hungry beast, and who could say when it would trounce her and leap up to savage the world with its ice-cold fangs ...

Still fitful were the scatterings of pallid snow – autumn snow ...

Bewildered days still came, blue sickly days, wistful, sighing, festering, utterly lost in lamentation and drizzling with icy light. Deathly days, when the birds fled to the woods with a cry, the waters babbled more anxiously and drifted sluggishly, thickened with dread. The earth shivered, and every creature raised vigilant, fearful eyes towards the north, towards the clouds' fathomless depths ...

The nights were still autumnal; blind, deaf, confused and full of tattered mists and the glow of dying stars, they mouldered in shivering silence, punctuated with stifled cries of trepidation, filled with painful sighs, brief scuffles, sudden hushes, the howling of dogs, the tossing of small frozen trees, the mournful voices of birds seeking shelter, the terrible calls from the void and from crossroads lost in darkness, the flapping of wings, shadows lying in wait under the walls of numbed cottages, creeping yowls, terrifying spectres, uncanny cries, horrible champings, shrill moans ...

Sometimes at sunset still, a huge red sun would prise itself free of the sombre plains of leaden sky and slump heavily, like a tub of molten iron, boiling scarlet and belching pitch-black smoke, girded with flaming brands, so that the whole world smouldered in conflagration.

And long, long into the night, the blood-red embers cooled and faded, until people said:

'Winter's waxing and will ride in on grim storms.'

And winter waxed indeed, every day, every hour, from moment to moment.

Until it came.

And first of all and fastest flew a call to arms.¹

One quiet languid morning, soon after the feast of St Barbara,² the patroness of a good death, the first brief, rippling winds descended. Coursing through the village, they howled like dogs on the scent, gnawing the fields, growling in the bushes, mauling the snows, toustling the gardens, sweeping the roads with their tails, wallowing in the waters and, here and there, stealthily snatching up an older thatched roof or fence. Then, with a twist and a yelp, they fled back to the forest – and on their heels, come late afternoon, the gales with their barbed tongues began to rise from the shadows, dark and wheezing.

All night long they gusted and whined in the fields, like a pack of hungry wolves. So wild was their carousing that by morning the ground emerged dappled as a bustard from under the trampled, ravaged snows, with only a few white rags left in the dips and ditches here and there or the odd patch shining in the fields. The roads stretched stiff and frozen. The frost, meanwhile, had sunk sharp fangs into the ground until it rang like iron. But as soon as day brightened, the winds ran away, yapping, to hide in the forest, where they crouched, trembling, poised for a tense and malevolent leap.

The sky darkened and grew overcast. Clouds crawled out from every lair, lifting their monstrous heads, stretching their crumpled hulks and shaking their dishevelled, livid manes, their green-tinged fangs glistening as they advanced in a herd – a menacing, glowering, silent throng lumbering across the sky. Huge black mounds moved in from the north, piled high, jagged and torn, forked like a jumble of shattered branches, intersected by deep abysses packed with green shoals of ice. They thrust ahead with savage force and dull souging. From the west, from beyond the inert black forest, slid slow blue swollen drifts, thinning like gauze in places as though veiling fire; one after another they came, an unbroken chain, an ever-growing line, like a flock of enormous birds. While from the east, flat clouds shuffled, rusty, bloodshot, suppurating, utterly loathsome, like rotten carrion dripping gore, and from the south they came, though stale and reddish, like fens or peat bogs, covered in welts and full of livid clods, of blots and terrible swarms – as though filled with writhing worms. And more still came from above, as though from the dying sun, falling in dirty clumps, or scattering, stained like cooling slag – and all were heading for each other, stacked in enormous mounds and flooding the sky in terrible black bubbling mud and scree ...

The world suddenly darkened, utterly silent; lights faded and the deep blue eyes of the pooling waters dimmed. Everything stiffened and stopped short as though astonished, holding its breath. Gusts of trepidation blew across the countryside, frost penetrated bones, fear caught at throats, souls crumbled, a cold dread beat its wings over all creation. A hare, fur ruffled, was seen tearing through the village, crows swooped with piercing cries into barns or right on to porches, dogs howled madly from the earth benches and people slunk home hurriedly, while the blind mare ran along the banks of the pond, dragging the remains of a cart behind her, bashing against trees and fences and squealing wildly as she searched for her stable.

The murky, stifling darkness unfurled: the clouds sagged lower, piling in from the forest in thick swirls, churning and rolling across the fields like terrible raging turbulent waters – they hurtled into the village and smothered everything in dirty freezing fog. All at once, the clouds were torn apart and the sky shone blue like water mirrored in a well. The mists suddenly eddied and from the riven cleft a gale blasted forth, followed by a second ... then a tenth ... and a hundredth!

Now they were howling in herds, pouring from the sky's throat like unfettered rivers broken free of their chains. The furious unshackled mob dashed against the clouds, threw themselves upon the darkness and blasted it apart completely, devouring and sweeping it aside like so much rotten straw in a maelstrom of squalling, whistling and noise.

The clouds, trampled by the sharp hooves of the gales, fled furtively towards the woods and thickets. The sky cleared, the day shone out once more with leaden eyes and all creation sighed with relief.

But the gales blew still, for nigh on a week, with no relief or pause. The days were bearable enough, with only those venturing out who were compelled by some need, while the rest stayed at home and waited for it to end. But the nights were not to be borne, for though bright, starry and quiet overhead, on the ground below, the tempest performed its devilish rites as though a hundred peasants had hanged themselves at once.³ You could not catch a wink with such bellowing, cracks, thuds and rumblings – like a thousand empty carts driving at high speed over bumpy earth – and what thumping, fit to make the ground tremble, and what hooting, God alone knew whose, and what screams, what howls!

The cottages rattled, for time and again a gale would ram its shoulders against the walls, slam against the quoins,⁴ shake the eaves, charge at the sill-beams, butt its head against doors, making them fly open, smash the windows, so folk had to rise in the middle of the night to stuff them with pillows, and tear inside with a squeal like a tiresome pig, bringing with it a lashing chill so that people were stiff with cold even under their quilts!

Beyond telling what folk endured those days and nights!

Beyond counting the damage that was done, the fences overturned, the thatch torn out. At the Voyt's the gale almost flattened a new shed. It ripped Bartek Koziol's barn roof right off and carried it half a furlong into the fields. It knocked down the Wincioreks' chimney, and at the mill it snatched away a chunk of the roof shingles, not to speak of the smaller losses! And the trees broken in the woods and orchards! On the high road it tore out some twenty poplars, felling them crosswise like corpses cruelly flayed and murdered.

Lipce was like a place deserted in those windswept clamorous days. The gale roistered along the roads with such force that it wrenched away anyone who stepped out of their cottage and tossed them carelessly aside – into ditches, against trees, or dangling from fences. Contrary Jasiek was even blown off the bridge and into the pond – the boy barely scrambled out. It blew incessantly, scattering sand and bearing away branches, wood chips, and straw from the roofs, sometimes even the crown of a smaller tree, so that debris flew about in a cloud of dust like scattered birds and bashed against the walls before hurtling into the distance!

The older folk took little notice of the tiresome, fractious winds.

They crowded inside the smoky cottages and all but quarrelled such was the tedium. It was hard even to poke your nose beyond the quoins, and only the most impatient of the women stole out to the farmsteads now and then, ostensibly to take a distaff to a neighbour, but mainly to exercise their tongues and have a moan. The men, meanwhile, threshed doggedly behind barn doors shut tight, and the flails beat from morning until late. The frost had withered the wheat, helping to loosen the husks, and only towards evening, when the gale relaxed a little, would a farmhand slip

across to the inn with a quart of grain or so in hand.⁵

And still the winds blew ceaselessly and the frost bit more keenly, so that brooks and streams now froze in the wintry bluster, the marshes congealed and even the pond was covered in transparent, pale-blue ice. Only by the bridge, where it was a little deeper, did the waters rush and resist, though the banks were utterly icebound, so that waterholes had to be hacked out.

A change came at last on St Lucy's Day.⁶

The frost eased and it grew a little warmer. The gales seemed to be dying, for they gave intermittent gasps, but were more gentle now and not so crotchety. The sky levelled out like a harrowed field covered in a huge, coarse, hoary sheet, and sunk so low it seemed propped on the roadside poplars.

But it was gloomy, grey and dull.

As soon as the bells pealed at noon, it grew a little darker and snow began to fall in huge flakes. It came down thick and fast and quickly feathered all the trees and rooftops.

Night soon fell, but the snow did not stop; it came down thicker still, a little drier and more powdery, and so it snowed all night.

By dawn the snow was three hands deep, the ground was completely covered in a soft fleece, the whole world shrouded in blue-white, and still it fell without pause.

Such quietness had descended upon the earth that not a single gust trembled, not a sound disturbed that downy flood, nothing. Everything had fallen silent, deafened, mute, like someone standing, slightly stooped, before a miracle and listening intently and solemnly to this barely perceptible rustling, this quiet stream, this inert whiteness fluttering and falling without cease.

Milky shadows were taking shape, growing, mounting. A pale, flickering, pristine dawn cascaded like the whitest, softest, loveliest wool; like a frozen nimbus it shifted, immeasurably dense, as though the light of all the stars, hardened as hoar frost and crushed to dust in their flight across the sky, had enveloped the earth. The woods were quickly obscured, the fields vanished, invisible to the eye, roads disappeared, the whole village melted and sank into that marvellous whiteness, into that blinding cloud, and finally nothing could be seen at all, other than those streams of snowy dust flowing so quietly, so sweetly, so evenly, like cherry-blossom petals on a moonlit night.

Three steps off you'd make out neither cottage nor tree nor fence nor any human figure. Only voices could be heard, flitting in the whiteness like feeble butterflies, deceptively, for there was no telling whence they came or whither they were going – fluttering more and more faintly, more quietly ...

It snowed for two days and two nights, until all the cottages were buried, like snowy haystacks, belching dirty knots of smoke. The roads were level with the fields, the gardens were brimming to the tips of their palings, the pond had completely vanished under the barrage. A boundless white plain, chilly, impenetrable, soft and beautiful, covered the earth. Still the snow fell, but drier and finer, so starry gleams now rent the nights, and in the daytime blue sky broke in patches through the fluttering white shives. Sounds were more audible in the clear air, voices sliced through sharply, brisk and strident. The village seemed to wake, began to move; some set off in sleighs, but quickly turned back, for the roads were impassable. Here and there, folk dug paths between the cottages, heaped aside the snow from doorways, pulled the doors of byres wide open. Everyone overflowed with joy, and the children were mad with glee; dogs were barking everywhere, licking the snow and racing about with the boys. The roads began to hum, there was a hubbub in the yards, shouts and pelting of snowballs. Children rolled in the soft, downy snow, built huge snowmen, dragged sledges about, so that squeals of delight and chasing filled the whole village and Rocho suspended lessons for the day as he could keep no one at their primers.

On about the third day, at very first light, the snow stopped falling. It still trickled fitfully, but like someone shaking a flour sack over the world, so that it made no mark, yet the sky remained overcast, the crows hung about the houses and alighted at the roadsides, and the night drew in, starless, leaden, whitewashed by the darkening snows, and so quiet, stiff and dead, it seemed drained completely of its power.

'Slightest wind'll rouse a snowstorm,' murmured old Bylica the next morning, peering through a little window.

'What difference does it make!' snarled Antek, heaving himself out of bed.

Hanka lit the fire in the hearth and looked into the hallway. It was early, the cockerels were crowing in the village, and murky still, as though someone had mixed lime with soot and dredged the world in it, so there was no making out trees, cottages or even distances. Only in the east did the first light appear, smouldering like ashen embers, while on the ground a deep quiet lay over the land and a raw chill filled the air.

In the room, too, the cold was bitter, damp and so penetrating that Hanka pushed her bare feet into her clogs. The fire was barely smouldering, the unseasoned juniper only crackled and smoked, so that Hanka had to pick splinters from a board, or poke in a handful of straw, before the branches caught flame at last and lit up a little.

'There's that much come down, a winter's worth already,' the old man piped up again, puffing on the window, thick with greenish ice, to peer outside.

The older boy, coming up to four years of age, began to snivel in bed. From the other side of the house, Stacho's half, the sharp voices of a quarrel could be heard, complaints and children's squeals and a door slamming.

'Weronka's starting the day with her usual prayers!' Antek muttered derisively, winding on his foot wrappings that had been warming at the fireside.

'She's grown' customed to nattering so she natters, though there's no need, but it's not in anger, may ...' the old man faltered.

'Oh aye, and when she slaps the kids about, that's not in anger neither? Or never has a good word for Stach, but is forever nagging him like a dog, that's out o' goodness, eh?' said Hanka, kneeling over the cradle to nurse her younger boy, who was whimpering and shuffling his legs. 'How long's it now? Three weeks we've been at yours and not a day's gone by without shouting or brawling or squabbling! A mongrel she is, not a woman! And that dunderhead Stach lets her breathe down his neck, works like an ox and leads a dog's life.'

The old man glanced up fearfully, and seemed about to protest, when the door opened from the hallway and Stacho poked his head into the room along with the flail he was carrying on his shoulder.

'Antek, do you want to come threshing? The organist told me to bring someone along for the barley. It's good and dry, comes away easy ... Filip were pressing me, but if you want to ... then aye, come make a grosz or two ...'

'God bless you, take Filip. I'm not killing myself for the organist.'

'As you like! Good day.'

Hanka almost started at Antek's answer, but quickly bent down and nestled her head into the cradle so as not to show her tears and vexation!

What was this? Such a winter, such frosts, such misery. They were on potatoes and salt alone and not two groszy to rub together and he didn't want to work! Whole days he sat about the house, puffing on his cigarettes and brooding! Or rushing out and about like a fool chasing the wind! 'My God, my God!' she moaned in distress. Even Jankiel wouldn't give credit – they'd be selling the cow next, what else could they do? He'd dug in his heels, so he'd sell, but he'd not take on work ... Aye, true, it were beneath him to go as a hired hand, grim it was, but what were they to do, what? If she'd been a man, my God, she'd not be sparing her hands, she'd work her fingers to the bone just to save the cow, to see things through till spring, endure the winter ... But what use was she, poor wretch, what? ... She could hardly bear the screech of her own soul.

She set about her usual daily tasks, glancing surreptitiously at her husband, who sat by the hearth. He'd wrapped the older boy up in a sheepskin and was rubbing his skinny legs with his warmed hand, gazing gloomily into the fire and sighing. The old man sat by the window, peeling potatoes.

A bitter, unsettling silence hung between them, replete with secret grudges, sharpened by a choking sense of destitution. They did not look into each other's eyes or address each other; their words were snared in vexation, smiles faded, stifled reproaches flashed in their eyes, and in their pale, haggard faces the rancour was visible, the ill feelings palpable, but along with a proud, iron-hard intransigence too. Three weeks had passed since they'd been turned out of the paternal homestead, so many long days, so many nights, but not a thing had either of them forgotten, the injury had not abated, their determination was as fixed as ever – it seemed as though it had been but the blink of an eye.

The fire crackled merrily, warmth flowed into the room, melting the ice on the windowpanes. Streaks of snow, blown in through the chinks, thawed under the timbers and the hard clay floor sweated and swam with damp.

'Will they come, those Jews?' she asked at last.

'So they said.'

Again, not a word more. For who'd speak first, and why? Hanka? ... When she was scared to open her mouth, in case all her accumulated griefs came pouring out in spite of herself? No, she kept everything inside and held off as best she could. Antek? What was there for him to say? That he had it rough? That was clear enough already. He was never quick to make friends and as for opening up, he'd no wish to, even to his wife! How do you speak, when your soul's eaten up with hatred, when your heart contracts with pain at every reminder? His fingers curled in such anger that he was ready to throw himself at the whole village!

He no longer harboured sweet memories of Jagna, as though he'd never cherished her, never taken her in these same arms now ready to tear her apart. But he bore her no grudge.

'Some women are like stray dogs. They'll go with anyone who tempts 'em with a bigger morsel or scares 'em with a stick.' Still, he rarely thought of her, she'd faded in his memory under the onslaught of the cruel, vivid and painful grievances he felt towards his father. The old man was the guilty one, his father was the wrongdoer, the knife that lodged in his heart and smarted ever more sharply – it was all his fault, his!

And he garnered, hoarded all the wrongs, every grief he'd ever known, and told them like a well-learned prayer! It made a painful, rankling rosary, but he threaded it through his heart, all the better to remember it!

A hearty fellow, he had no care for his own poverty; as long as there was a roof over his head, he had no need of more. Let the woman fret over the children. No, it was pure hurt alone that scorched like fire and grew constantly, spreading in him like stinging nettles! Why, only three weeks gone, and the whole village had turned their backs as though they did not know him, as though he were a stray vagabond. They avoided him as if he were plague-ridden; no one stopped to chat with him, looked in at his place, commiserated, had a kind word. They just gave him looks as though he were a ruffian.

Forget it, then. He was not going to impose, but nor would he hide in corners; he would not step aside for anyone! An eye for an eye! But what was it all about? Because he'd come to blows with his father? ... That was hardly a first in the village! Didn't Józef Wachnik put up his fists every few days? ... Hadn't Stach Płoszka broken his old man's leg? And no one gave them an ill word, it was only him they shunned, for whomever God came down upon, the saints were close behind. It was the old man's work, his alone; but he'd get his come-uppance for all of it, that he would.

He breathed nothing but revenge and the thought of it, and lived all this time in fever and forgetfulness; he washed his hands of work, ignored hardship, had no care for tomorrow, but only wandered about in heavy torment, torturing himself. Often at night he'd spring from the bed and fly to the village, hang about the lanes, hide in the shadows and dream of fierce vengeance, swearing he'd never forgive the wrongs done to him.

They ate breakfast in silence. He sat dejected, chewing on memories like bitter, prickly thistles.

It was broad day, the fire had gone out and the cold snowy light beat through the thawing panes. Sad icy gleams spread into the corners of the room, laying it bare and exposing it in all its wretchedness.

Dear Lord – Boryna's cottage seemed a manor beside this hovel; quite apart from the house, his father's byre was more fit for human beings. A rotten sty this was and not a home; a heap of mouldering planks, dung and rotting rubbish. Not one board on the ground, a clay floor full of dips and frozen mud and trampled muck. The slightest warmth from the fireplace made it stink worse than a dunghill, and the decrepit, warped and musty walls heaved on this quagmire, the damp streaming down them, while in the corners frost shook its hoary beard. The walls were full of holes, stuffed with clay and with straw and dung in places! The low ceiling sagged like an old torn sieve and there were more cobwebs and straw than beams. The only wares and artefacts that veiled this misery a little were the few holy pictures on the walls, and the pole hung with clothes and a chest that screened the brushwood partition behind which the cows were penned.

Hanka, though slow, had soon despatched the household chores; indeed, there was little enough to do. A cow, a heifer, a pig, a couple of geese and a few hens – that was the whole parade, her whole treasure. She dressed the boys and shortly they trundled off to play with Weronka's children in the hallway, from whence clamour and shouts soon came, then she pulled herself together a little, for the merchants were due and she must be off to the village.

She wanted to consult her husband and discuss the sale, but she did not dare begin, for Antek went on sitting before the dying embers, gazing vacantly and so gloomily that she was alarmed.

What was up with him? She slipped off her clogs so as not to irritate him with the clatter, but kept peeking at him, more frequently than ever, with anxious tenderness and concern.

'It's harder for him, he's not like the others, it's harder,' she thought and a fierce desire seized her to talk, to ask, to commiserate with him. She was standing right by him, already had that kind word waiting in her melting heart – but she didn't dare say a thing. How was she to speak, when he paid her no heed, as though he saw nothing of what was around him at all! She sighed painfully; her soul was heavy. No – it was no honeyed sweetness that she felt in her heart, but bitter wormwood! My Jesus, other women had it different, even lodging servants had it better. And here, everything was on her shoulders: you trouble and chase about and all the cares are yours, all the worries, and no one to talk to, no one to pour out your sorrows to! Let him shout her down, even beat her; at least she'd know there was a living man in the house and not a block of wood. But this one – nothing. Sometimes he'd growl like a mad dog or give you such a look it was like ice freezing your soul – you could not get through to him, nor approach him with a sincere heart, in the usual way of a marriage, or like a friend. Ha! Just try saying a word or having a moan! What was a woman, a wife, to him – let her just mind the house, cook the dinner and watch the children. What did he care? ... When did he ever cherish her, caress her, disarm her with kindness, draw her close or have a good chat! He cared for none of it, no! He was always aloof, behaved like a stranger, had no idea what went on around him! And you, the wife, it's all on you: you suffer every trouble alone, you run yourself ragged and fret and not even a good word in return!

Unable to hold back the painful flood of grief and tears, she fled to the cows, beyond the partition. Leaning against the manger, she sobbed quietly, and when the skewbald began to pant and lick her head and shoulders, she burst into noisy lamentations ...

'And you'll be gone, little one, you too ... they'll soon be here ... they'll haggle ... tether your horns ... lead you off ... into the wide world ... our little mainstay ... into the big wide world!' she whispered, throwing her arms about its neck and nestling her pained soul against the tender creature.

She could not suppress her moans or cries, for a sudden fierce revolt had risen in her. No, it couldn't go on – they'd sell the cow, there was nothing to eat, and he just sat there, didn't look for work, wouldn't go threshing though they'd asked, and if he earned that zloty and twenty groszy a day there'd be something for salt, for lard, when there was no longer even a drop of milk to be had!

She went back into the room.

'Antek!' she said sharply, boldly, ready to have her say.

He lifted quiet bloodshot eyes towards her and looked so sad and mournful that her soul lurched, the anger subsided and her heart beat fast with pity ...

'You told them to come for the cow?' she said quietly and oddly gentle.

'Probably they're on the way since the dogs out on the road are yammering ...'

'Nay, they're barking at the Sikoras', she said, looking out.

'Before noon they said, so any minute.'

'Must we sell, then?'

'O' course, we need the money, nor have we fodder enough for two ... We must, Hanka, what else can we do ... it's a shame about the cow ... aye ... but beggars can't be choosers ...' he said quietly and so kindly that Hanka's soul stood still and her heart began to flutter with joy and hope. She looked into his eyes like a faithful obedient dog, so that in that instant she did not mourn the cow or anything. She simply gazed intently without anguish at that beloved face, and listened to that voice, which swept through her heart like fire and warmed her with its kindness and tenderness.

'Aye, got to be done ... there's still the heifer. Mid-Lent we'll get her in calf somehow, so we'll still have a drop of milk to come,' she agreed, just so that he would go on talking.

'If the fodder runs out, we can buy more.'

'Oats prob'ly, there's rye enough till springtime. Father, go shift the heap aside, check the potatoes haven't frozen.'

'Sit, it's too heavy a job for you, I'll dig it,' said Antek.

He rose, took off his sheepskin, picked up the shovel and went outside.

The snow was almost level with the roof, for the house stood exposed, almost outside the village, a good *stajk*² from the road and unshielded by fence or garden, with just a few crooked wild cherry trees growing by the windows, but under so much snow that only the branches poked out, like fingers gnarled by sickness. The old man had managed to dig away and clear the windows, but you could barely make out the potato pit, submerged deep in snow.

Antek set to work with a vengeance. The snow was high as a man and, though fresh, it had settled and hardened and had to be cut into bricks. He got up a fine sweat before he was done, but he worked willingly enough and was in good spirits. He kept throwing snowballs at the children frolicking at the door, but at times, when past torments came to mind, his hands would falter, he'd pause, lean against the wall and cast his eyes over the land. He'd sigh and once again his soul would blunder like a lost sheep on a dark night.

It was a grey, cloudy day and the bleached sky hung low. The snow spread in a thick, downy fleece, stretching as far as the eye could see across the dull and lifeless blue plain. The misty frosted air swathed the whole world in soft yarn, and as the Bylica cottage was on a little rise of sorts, the village could be seen as though in the palm of your hand. Rows of haystacks stood side by side like snowy molehills, strung in a long garland around the snow-heaped pond, and not a cottage could be made out anywhere. All had vanished under the snow, but here and there the black walls of a barn emerged, ruddy peat smoke billowed, small grey trees peeped from under snowy caps, or brisk voices sounded in the whiteness, flying from one end of the village to the other, and the monotonous beating of flails thumped with a hollow sound as though from beneath the ground. The roads lay empty and buried, and not a living soul loomed on the snow-driven fields; nothing but that great white desolate emptiness, suspended in snow. The hazy distances melted so that there was no telling sky from ground; only the forest showed blue in the whiteness, as though a cloud were hanging there.

But Antek did not gaze long over the snowy wastes. He turned his eyes back to the village, seeking his father's house, but he hadn't time to gather his thoughts, for Hanka had climbed into the pit and was screeching.

'They've not frozen! The Wachniks' were so chilled by the wind, they had to chuck half to the pigs, but ours are good.'

'Good, aye. Climb up. I think I see the Jews coming! Bring out the cow!'

'Oh, Jews, aye – who else if not those plague-ridden Jews!' she cried angrily.

For from the direction of the inn, along the completely buried footpath scarcely dented by the print of Stach's clogs, two Jews were indeed digging their way through. Half the village dogs were chasing after them and barking with great delight, setting about them so fiercely that Antek came out to defend them.

'How goes it, eh? These snows, such snows! We are late. You cannot walk, you cannot ride, you see? And in the forest they've already summoned a corvée to clear the road!'

Antek didn't reply, but just led them to the cottage to warm themselves a little.

Hanka, meanwhile, wiped down the cow's dung-encrusted flanks, milked what had collected since morning and led her outside, through the chamber. The cow went unwillingly, resisting; stepping over the threshold, she stretched out her muzzle and sniffed, and set about licking the snow – until without warning she gave a drawn-out bellow, quiet and pitiful, and tugged at the tether so hard the old man, now holding her, could barely restrain her.

Hanka could bear no more, such a bitter grief possessed her that she burst into tears and the children joined in, hanging on to their mother's woollen skirts and raising a cry and lament!

Nor was Antek any the merrier, oh no. Gritting his teeth, he leaned against the wall and watched the crows, which had flown down on to the snow that had been disturbed below, while the two merchants jabbered together and began groping the cow and examining her from every side.

Aye, their hearts were heavy as at a funeral, so that they turned aside from the little beast, which tugged in vain at her tether, uselessly straining her rolling, frightened eyes towards its masters. In vain did she bellow dully.

'Jesus! ... Is this why I fed you, little cow, fussed over you, took such trouble with you ... so that they should take you off to slaughter ... to your doom ...' lamented Hanka, beating her head against the cottage wall, and the children beat theirs tearfully in accompaniment.

But in vain are your tears and your lamentation, all for naught, O man, for you will neither resist necessity, nor overcome fate, nor that which is meant to be ...

'How much?' the grey-haired, elder Jew asked at last.

'Three hundred zlotys.'

'Three hundred zlotys for that bit of rind! Are you ill, Antek?'

'Less of the rind, you, before I give you one! Hark at him, a young cow, barely five year, well fed,' shrieked Hanka.

'Hush ... hush ... anger has no place in trade ... Will you take thirty roubles?'

'I've said my piece.'

'And I am saying mine. Thirty-one ... well, thirty-one and a half ... well, thirty-two – give me your hand ... well, thirty-two and half ... agreed?'

'I've said.'

'Thirty-three, my final word! No, then no!' the younger Jew said phlegmatically and looked about for his stick, while the elder fastened his gabardine.

'For such a cow! ... Why, for heaven's sake ... a cow built like a byre, the hide alone's worth ten roubles ... swindlers ... Christ-slayers ...' the old man stammered, patting the cow, but no one took any notice of him.

The Jews began haggling spiritedly, but Antek firmly stood his ground too, dropping his price a little, but not much, for in truth the cow was worth a lot, and if he were to sell to another farmer, and in spring, he'd get fifty roubles, for sure. But where necessity squeezes, need is harnessed close behind – the Jews knew this well and though they clamoured loud and louder and struck Antek's palm in agreement with increasing eagerness, they added but little more, at most half a rouble at a time ...

It reached the point where they made to depart ill-temperedly. Hanka was already tugging the cow back to its pen, and even Antek was infuriated and ready to forgo the sale, but the merchants turned back and how they cried and bickered and swore that they could give no more. There was a further striking of palms and the cow was examined once more – and so agreement was reached at forty roubles with two zlotys tether money for Bylica.²

They paid straight away; the old man led the cow after them to the sleigh waiting at the inn, while Hanka and the children saw the skewbald off as far as the road. Hanka stroked her muzzle at every step, or draped herself over the little creature, unable to tear herself away or quell her vexation and grief ...

She waited at the road too, watching the skewbald go, her whole soul fulminating at those unbaptized yellas!¹⁰

To lose such a cow, it was no wonder vengeance had turned Hanka's liver.

'It's empty as though they'd taken someone off to the graveyard,' Hanka said on returning. She kept glancing towards the empty stall, or peering out of the window at the trampled path, marked by dung and hoof prints, and from time to time would burst into tears and lamentation.

'Would you stop all this bawling like a calf!' shouted Antek, sitting at the table with the money spread out.

'It's all the same to the one who feels no pain. It were no bother to you to hand over the cow to the Jews for slaughter!'

'Sure, I'll tear myself apart then, and squeeze you some money out of my guts, eh?'

'We're no better than the poorest hired hands, like beggars, not even a drop o' milk nor any comforts! I've worked so hard for us, so hard! My Jesus! My Jesus! Other folk strive, toil like oxen, bring a little extra for the home, but him, he sells the last cow my father gave me ... Why, it's all going to rack and ruin, all of it!' she wailed, beside herself.

'Bawl away, maybe it'll drain your head, given that you're stupid and have no sense! Here's the money – pay what's owing, buy what you need and get the rest put away!' He shoved a heap of money towards her, stowing five rouble notes in his wallet.

'What d'you need that much for?'

'What for? I'm not setting out with just a staff.'

'Where are you off to?'

'I'm away, to look for work. I'm not staying here to rot!'

'Away! Dogs walk barefoot everywhere and everywhere the wind blows the same down a poor man's back! I'm to stay here alone, am I?' She raised her voice unwittingly and moved nearer menacingly. He took no notice, put on his sheepskin, fixed his belt and looked for his cap.

'I'll not work for peasants here – I'll wither first!' he said.

'The organist needs someone for threshing!'

'Ha, that upstart, that clod, does nothing but belch in the choir and look into farmers' fists and live by what he can beg or cheat of 'em. I'll not go to such to earn ...'

'The work-shy'll always find an excuse!'

'Stop your taunting!' he yelled with anger.

'Don't matter what I say – you'll do just as you please!'

'I'll go try at the manors,' he said, calm again. 'Ask around about service, maybe from Yuletide, as a hired hand if need be, but I'm going. Anything not to rot here and see the wrongs done me always afore my eyes. I'll not stand it ... I've had enough, enough of people's pity and their glances, like I'm some mangy dog! ... I'm away where my nose leads me, just as far and as quick as I can ...' He began to shout and grow excited.

Hanka froze in dismay and stood motionless; she'd never known him this way.

'Goodbye. I'll be back in a few days.'

'Antek!' she cried desperately.

'What?' He turned back from the hallway.

'Do you not have a kind word ... not one ...'

'What now, hugging and caressing? ... That's hardly on my mind!' He slammed the door and left.

Whistling through his teeth, Antek leaned on his staff and walked briskly, until the snow crunched underfoot. He looked back at the cottage. Hanka was standing at the front, convulsed with weeping, and Weronka stood looking out of the window.

'Bawls and bawls, dammit! That's all she's good for! ... Off and away!' he murmured and looked about him, casting his eyes over the frosted snowy whiteness. A strange longing tugged at him, compelling him, urging him on, so that he thought of other villages with joy, of new people, another life. It had come upon him unexpectedly and snatched him up so suddenly, like a flood sweeping a frail shrub away. There was no resisting or returning. Fate had cast him into the world.

Even an hour before he hadn't thought of going, hadn't known! It had come of its own accord, from out there, this urge, blown in surely by the wind, kindling an irrepressible desire in his heart to escape. Just to get away from here, wages or not ... *Hej!* He'd like to fly away like a bird, into the wide world, over forests, over boundless lands ... Aye, why should he rot here, waiting for what? Those memories had already eaten away at him, sucked his soul dry, and to what end? ... The priest was right: he'd made it clear Antek wouldn't win in court against his father, but would end by losing more money still. And as for vengeance, he'd await a more favourable time; there was no man yet whom he'd forgiven a wrong ... But now – straight ahead, wherever, so long as it was far from Lipce ...

'Where to first?'

He stood at the turning to the poplar road and, hesitating a little, he gazed about the fields, lost in the mist. He was chilled to the bone, his teeth chattered and he shivered inside.

'Through the village and along the road behind the mill,' he decided quickly and turned towards the village. He'd not gone half a *staje*, when he had to step aside under the poplars – a sleigh was bearing down on him, hurtling straight down the middle of the road, at full tilt, in clouds of snow and jingling bells.

It was Boryna and Jagusia. The old man himself was driving. The horses flew, sweeping the sleigh along as though it were a feather and still Boryna was cracking the whip, urging them on, talking and laughing. Jagusia too was talking loudly, but broke off suddenly, spotting Antek. Their eyes fastened on each other for a split second, a flash, before they were torn apart. The sleigh dashed past and disappeared into a flurry of snow but Antek did not move from the spot. He'd turned quite to stone and just gazed after them ... as they flickered fleetingly through the billowing snowstorm, with a flash of Jagusia's red skirts, or a loud tinkling of bells that faded, vanished, as they raced through the whiteness ... a roof of frosted branches making a tangled dome above them, like a forest track cutting through the snow, propped up by the blackened poplar trunks stooping on either side of the road, the sleigh now leaning into a heavy, laborious ascent up the hill ... He was still gazing into her eyes, right before him, sparkling in the snow, burgeoning everywhere along the road like flax flowers, and looking at him, startled and sorry, astonished and joyful both, searing and blazing, aflame.

His soul dimmed, clouded over, as though the hoar frost had completely engulfed and frozen him solid, and those blue eyes alone brightened within him. Hanging his head, he trudged along, turning time and again, but there was nothing to be seen now under the poplars, only a bell sounding in the distance and the snowy haze.

He forgot everything, as though he'd suddenly lost his soul. His memories slipped away, he looked about helplessly, not knowing what to do ... where to go ... or what had happened. He was sunk in a waking dream and could not wake up.

Almost unwittingly, he turned towards the inn, passing a few sleighs filled with people, but though he looked intently, he recognized no one.

'Where's this crowd rushing to?' he asked Jankiel, who was standing on the threshold.

'To court. There's a lawsuit with the manor over the cows and assaulting the herdsman – you know the one! Those are the witnesses, and Boryna's gone ahead.'

'Will they win?'

'Why should they lose? With the squire from Wola as the accused, and the judge a squire from Rudki – why would a squire lose? Folk will have a day out, sweep the roads clear, have fun – our people in town need to earn a bit too. Everyone stands to gain something, everyone.'

Antek did not listen to his mockery. He ordered vodka, leaned against the bar and stood staring ahead of him, almost oblivious, for a good hour, without even touching his glass.

'What's ailing you?'

'Eh ... what indeed ... Let me through to the snug.'

'I cannot, there's traders in there, big merchants. They've bought another holding for logging from the manor, at Wolf's Hollow, so they need a bit of quiet – they might even be sleeping.'

'I'll drag those scabs out by their beards and chuck 'em in the snow!' Antek shouted, rushing towards the snug in a frenzy, but he turned back at the door, seized the vodka bottle and squeezed behind a table in the darkest corner.

The inn was empty and quiet, other than some Jews shouting something in their own tongue so that Jankiel came running, or the odd person who would drop in for a drink, knock it back and leave.

The sun had passed its highest point and a frost must have taken hold, for the sleigh runners creaked on the snow and a chill blew through the inn. Antek went on sitting and slowly drinking, seemingly deep in thought and completely unaware of what was going on in and around him.

He drank a quart and then another, and all the while those eyes shone blue before him, so close, so close, he could almost touch them with his eyelids. He drank a third ... still they shone, but now they'd begun to circle and sway around the inn, flickering like lights. Icy with fright, he leapt to his feet, slamming the bottle on the table so that it shattered to pieces, and made for the door.

'Pay up!' shouted Jankiel, blocking his way. 'Pay up – I'll not give you credit.'

'Out of the way, Jew, damn it, or you're dead!' Antek yelled with such force that the Jew paled and hurriedly stepped aside.

Antek crashed through the door and ran out.

CHAPTER 2

The day seemed to brighten a little at noon, but only for as long as you might wave a spill after lighting it, for it soon went out and darkened, as though the snow were mustering forces again and making ready.

At Antek's it was strangely dark too, cold and sad; the children were playing on the bed and twittering quietly to each other like frightened chicks, while Hanka was so restless with anxiety she didn't know what to do. She went back and forth, glancing out of the window or standing outside the house casting feverish eyes across the snow. But no, not a living soul was to be seen on the roads or in the fields. A few sleighs threaded their way from the inn and vanished under the poplars, as though they'd sunk into a snowy gulf, leaving neither trace nor sound of a voice behind. Nothing, bar that lifeless quiet and unbounded emptiness!

'If only some beggar would look in, just someone to chat!' she said with a sigh.

'*Kucusie! Kucu, kucu, ku-cu!*' She began to chase the hens over the snow, as they'd scattered in search of somewhere to roost on the cherry trees. She carried them to their perches and on the way back gave Weronka a mouthful, for hark, that one had put a basin in the porch with slops for the poultry and those plague-ridden pigs had spilled it on the ground, spreading a puddle in front of the door.

'Mind your pigs since you fancy yourself a housekeeper, tell your kids ... I'm not slopping about in mud cause of you!' she yelled through the door.

'Sold her cow so she thinks she's got sommat to say. Mud's a bother now for the fine lady, while she sits in a sty herself ...'

'My cow and where I live are none o' your business!'

'And my pigs are my business, got that?'

Hanka just slammed the door, for how to reply to such a devil? Say a word and you'll get two dozen back and a fist into the bargain. She secured the door with a hook, got out the money and set about struggling to count it. It was quite a labour over such a sum, and she was constantly going wrong. Angry still at Weronka and anxious over Antek, she kept fancying she heard the skewbald grunting ... or she'd be flooded with memories of the old house.

'It's true, we do live in a sty, true!' she whispered, looking about the room. 'Back there, they've a floor, windows wherever you look, whitewashed walls, and it's warm and clean and up to your ears in everything ... What'll they be doing now? ... Józka'll be washing the pots after dinner, Jagna will be spinning and looking out through clean, frostless panes ... Does she lack for anything! ... She got all the beads after Mother, and that many woollen skirts, that many clothes, that many shawls! ... She won't work her fingers to the bone, won't have any worries, eats her fill o' fat ... Didn't Stacho say that Jagustynka was working for her, while she lazes about till broad daylight under the quilt, sipping tea ... Potatoes are not to her liking ... and the old man does nowt but fawn and fuss over her like a child ...'

A sudden anger seized her, so that she leapt from the crate she was sitting on and shook her fist.

'She's a thief, the scum, a thief! That pig, that sloven!' she shouted aloud, so that the old man, who was dozing on the stove bench, was startled awake.

'Father, go mulch the potatoes and heap the pit with snow! – it's looking like frost,' she murmured calmly, setting about her counting again.

But the old man dallied over the work. The snow was heaped high, he was none too strong, and the two zlotys tether money gave him no peace besides – two zlotys shining on the table, almost new, as he well remembered ...

'Maybe they'll give 'em me,' he thought. 'Who's owed 'em after all?' ... His hand was still numb from gripping the halter, the skewbald had tugged so hard ... Hadn't he held her ... praised her to the buyers? They'd heard ... maybe they'd hand it over ... Straight off, at the very next indulgences, he'd buy the eldest, Pietrusz, a mouth organ ... the younger'd have to have something too ... And Weronka's children ... little bandits they were, and spoilt ... but still ... and snuff for himself ... but the strong kind that turns your guts, not Stach's weak stuff ... not even a sneeze out of that ... He reckoned away but worked at such a slow pace that in an hour or so, when Hanka looked out, there was barely a layer of snow covering the straw.

'You eat like a man but get as much done as a child ...'

'I'm hurrying. Hanuś, I am, only I'm gasping a bit, I were catching my breath ... I'll be done this instant ... this instant ...' he stammered in alarm.

'It's twilight by the forest already, a frost's taking, and the pit looks like pigs've been rooting in it. Get inside and watch the children.'

She tackled the snow herself, and so briskly that in two prayers the pit was heaped up and handsomely patted down.

But it was darkening already as she was finishing. A biting chill rose in the room; the damp clay floor froze hard and thudded under their clogs like a threshing floor. The frost picked up where it had left off and covered the little panes with patterns again. The children whimpered quietly as though they were hungry; she didn't hush them, there wasn't time. There was fodder to be chopped for the heifer, the pig to be fed that was squeaking and pushing at the door, the geese to water, and again she recited to herself whom she had to pay and how much, until having done all the chores she got ready to go out.

'Father, light the fire and mind the children, I'll be back in a few prayers, and if Antek comes in, there's cabbage in the pot on the hotplate ...'

'All right, dear Hanka, I'll light it, I'll mind 'em, and cabbage in the pot, I'll mind it, Hanka, I will ...'

'And I took the tether money. You don't need it after all – you've got food, you've got clothing, what more d'you need?'

'Aye, I've everything Hanuś, everything ...' he whispered quietly, and turned quickly to the children, as the tears sprang to his eyes.

Outside, the frost wrapped itself about Hanka, so she pulled her apron tight over her head. The snow was crisp under her feet; dry and strangely transparent blue shadows were spilling across the ground. The sky was as clear as glass, stretching unclouded into the distance; high above, here and there, first one star twinkled, then another.

Now and then, Hanka patted her bosom, where the money was, and thought she might ask around for work for Antek; she wouldn't just let him go off and leave! His words came back to her now, and the memory of them made her giddy. No, he'd not go to another village, to strangers, while there was life left in her – she'd wither away with longing!

She swept her eyes over the road, over the snowed-in houses, barely visible orchards and endless grey-white fields. The quiet frosty evening deepened more and more rapidly; more stars appeared, as though someone had sown a fistful of them across the sky, and on the lustreless ground the little lights of cottages glimmered across the snowy whiteness. You could smell smoke on the air; there were people trudging along the road, voices carrying low above the snow.

'Here's where I've grown up, and I'll not knock about the world like yon wind, no!' Hanka whispered firmly, slowing down, for she was sinking into the snow to her knees in places so that she had to keep pulling out her clogs!

'Here in the world is where the Lord Jesus put me, and here I stay till I die. We must just make it to spring, then it'll be better, easier. And if Antek won't work, I'll not go begging. I'll do spinning, weaving, anything I can set my hand to and not go under ... Why, Weronka earns enough from her weaving to put a grosz or two by ...' she pondered, turning towards the inn. She praised God in greeting, to which Jankiel replied, 'For ever, amen!' and swayed over his book as usual, ignoring her until she put the money down in front of him, then he smiled genially and turned up the light in the hanging lamp, helped her count it out and even offered her a vodka. He said not a word about Antek or his debt; he was a smart scoundrel, for what need had a woman to know of men's business? She'd not take it right, not see it in the proper light – always quick with the tongue. Only when she was about to leave, did he say:

'And what's your husband up to?'

'Antek? ... Gone to look for work!'

'Is there not plenty in the village? They're building a sawmill at the miller's, and I need help with carting timber too.'

'Ha, my husband'll not be working in the inn!' she exclaimed.

'Let him sleep, then, get his rest, if he's such a gentleman! You've geese – fatten them up, I'll buy them for the holiday.'

'Like I'm selling. I've kept but a few to raise!'

'You can buy young ones in the spring. I need some fattened. Take everything on credit, if you like. You can pay with geese, we'll settle up ...'

'I'll not sell the geese.'

'You'll sell, when you've eaten the skewbald. You'll even sell cheap.'

'You wish, you scum!' she muttered on her way out.

The frost gripped so tight her nostrils shrank. The sky was now sparkling with stars, and an icy nipping wind blew from the woods. She went slowly all the same, keeping to the middle of the road, and peered curiously at the houses: there were lights at the Wachniks', the last cottage before the church; from the Ploszka's homestead rose a hubbub of voices and the squealing of pigs; all the windows were blazing at the presbytery, and some horses were stamping impatiently in front of the porch; meanwhile, at the Kłabs', alongside the presbytery, a light was shining too and someone was walking past the byre, for she could hear the crunch of clogs on snow; and further on, in front of the church, where the village spread two arms, as it were, around the pond, little could be detected in the night – only a thin drizzle of light through the murky whiteness here and there, and the barking of a dog.

Hanka looked at her father-in-law's house, sighed and turned at the church, down the long stretch of fences running between the Kłabs' orchard and the priest's garden towards the organist's. The path was narrow, barely trodden, and overhung with bushes so heavy with snow that it kept tipping on her every time she brushed against a branch.

The house was set back in the priest's homestead, but had a separate driveway. Shouts could be heard, and crying, and in front of the lobby loomed the dark shape of a box. Clothes, a quilt and some other stuff had been tossed on to the snow ... Magda, the organist's servant, stood dissolved in tears by the wall and yelling at the top of her voice.

'They've thrown me out! Turned me out! Out, like a dog in this cold! Where's an orphan like me supposed to go now? Where?'

'Stop your yelling, you pig of a girl!' a voice yelled from the open lobby. 'I'll take a stick to you, then you'll shut up! Off to Franek's, double quick, you wretch, off with you! How are you, Borynowa! Oh my dear, it were clear from autumn ... didn't I say, didn't I beg and beseech and warn? What use is a warning to a wretch! Everybody's to their beds but she's off out. Now she's come back from her little walks with a bastard! Didn't I say: Magda, think, mark, he won't marry you ... she denied everything right to my face! Aye, I saw the girl getting fatter, growing like yeast, so I tell her in good faith: get off and hide in another village while there's time, before people know ... Did she listen! ... Till the pains seize her today in the byre at milking ... she tipped a whole pail over ... and my Frania comes running in scared, shouting that something's up with Magda! Jesus, Mary, such shame in a house of mine – what would the priest say! Off with you from outside my house or I'll tell 'em to throw you into the road!' the organist's wife shouted again, springing in front of the cottage.

Magda started away from the wall, and with cries and complaints began to gather her things and tie them into a bundle.

'Come inside. It's cold ... I want no trace of you left!' was the parting shot.

She led Hanka through the long hallway.

The fire burning in the hearth lit up the huge low room. The organist, in his shirtsleeves, red as a crayfish, sat before the fire, baking communion wafers ... He'd scoop up a spoonful of batter waiting in a basin, pour it into an iron wafer press, squeeze until it hissed and place it in the fire, resting the handles on an upended brick. Then he'd turn over the mould, take out the wafer and toss it on to a low table for the small boy sitting there to trim with scissors.

Hanka greeted everyone and kissed the organist's wife's hand.

'Sit down, warm yourself – what's the news?'

Well, Hanka couldn't bring herself to the point so quickly, she didn't dare. Looking about the place, she peeked in the next room, where opposite the doorway on a long table against the wall were piles of white wafers, weighed down with a plank, and two girls were putting them into packets, twisting them with paper strips. From deeper within came the sound of an unseen clavichord tinkling monotonously. The music was being spun like a web: first it ran high, like singing, then it quietened so that only a jangle of notes could be heard, or else it suddenly broke off and squeaked, so that Hanka got goosebumps and the organist would yell:

'Hey, you dolt, you've dropped the tune like a hot potato! Repeat from *Laudamus pueri* ...'³

'For Yuletide, already?' she asked, since it was not proper to sit silently like a curmudgeon.

'Yes, the parish is huge, spread wide, but everyone needs their wafers before Christmas, after all, so I must start in good time.'

'Wheat, are they?'

'Have a taste.'

He handed her a still-warm wafer.

'As if I'd dare eat it!'

She held it through her apron and gazed at it under the light with awe and a little fear.

'Jesus, look at all the pictures pressed into it!'

'On the right, in the first circle, that's the Mother of God, St John and the Lord Jesus. In the second ... see ... a manger, hayrack, cattle ... Baby Jesus on the hay, St Joseph, the Mother of God, and here kneel the three kings ...' the organist's wife explained.

'True enough, it's all done so clever, true!'

She wrapped the wafer in her scarf and hid it in her bosom, but some peasant had just come in and said something to the organist, who called out:

'Michał! They've arrived for the christening. Take the keys and go to the church, Ambrozy's busy at the presbytery, the priest knows already ...'

The music fell silent and a tall pale boy crossed the room.

'An orphan, my brother's boy, he's practising to be an organist, and my husband's teaching him for free. What can you do? ... You must take the strain and help your own kin ...'

By fits and starts, Hanka opened up, sighing and divulging her griefs and troubles. For the first time in three weeks, she could spill out everything.

They listened to her, spoke their own piece, and though careful not to say a word about Boryna, they showed such sincere pity that she dissolved into tears. The organist's wife, being a clever woman, soon caught on and was first to say:

'You'll have more time on your hands, perhaps. You could spin some yarn for me. I was meant to give it to Pakulina, but you take it. Be sure to do it on a spinning wheel; it won't come out evenly on a distaff.'

'God bless – I need the work, but I didn't dare ask ...'

'Now, now, don't thank me; it's only right we help each other. The yarn's carded already, there'll be a hundred pounds⁴ of it.'

'I'll spin, I'm good at it – at Father's I spun for everyone, and wove, and dyed. They didn't have to buy clothes, oh no.'

'Look, how dry and soft it is.'

'Must be from the manor's sheep, lovely wool ...'

'And if you should need flour, groats, peas, just say, I'll give you some. We'll settle it with the work.'

She led Hanka into the storeroom, which was full of sacks and barrels of wheat. Slabs of bacon were hanging on the wall; whole skeins of yarn hung from the rafters and linen was piled in great rolls; there were dried mushrooms, cheeses, jars of all kinds; and on the shelves a whole row of loaves as big as wheels and a host of other goods, impossible to count.

'I'll spin as even as can be, on the wheel. God bless you for your help, but I'm thinking I won't manage to carry all that wool on my own.'

'I'll send a farmhand over with it.'

'That's good, as I've still got to go to the village.'

Hanka thanked her again, but more quietly now, and a little cool – envy had bitten her heart.

'It's folk give 'em it all – folk fashion it, lug it over, for their full storeroom; like he don't cheat folk by charging interest! A sheep in the byre sates every desire!⁵ I'd like to see 'em try working themselves! Ha!' she thought to herself as she wended her way between the fences.

There wasn't a trace left of Magda, no; only some old clog, dark against the snow. She quickened her pace, for it was late; she'd been at the organist's for quite some time.

'Where to now, where can I ask about work for Antek?'

When she'd been mistress of the house, everyone had kept on friendly terms with her. There was always someone dropping by, on some business and in clear goodwill ... and now here she was, standing in the middle of the road, agonizing over where to go, to whom ... No, she wouldn't go begging to anyone; she'd just be glad just to chat with the other women as she used to.

She paused in front of the Kłąbs', she paused in front of Szymonowa's cottage, but enter she did not. She didn't dare and she recalled how Antek had ordered her not to rub shoulders with anyone.

'They'll not advise, they'll not help, and they'll be as sorry for you as for a dead dog!' he'd said.

'Oi, it's true, God's truth!' she whispered, remembering the organist's house.

Hej! If she were a man, she'd soon roll up her sleeves and set everything straight. She'd not whine or parade her wretchedness in front of people.

She felt so ravenous for work, such energy inside, that she even straightened up and stepped more firmly, more briskly. And a longing, such a longing, to pass by her father-in-law's cottage, to look in, if only through the fences, to feast her eyes at least. But she turned instead before the church, on to the little path leading across the frozen pond towards the mill, and went quickly without looking to either side, preoccupied entirely with not sliding on the slippery ice and crossing as quickly as she could so as not to see, not to wrench open the wound in her soul by letting in memories. But she couldn't resist, for all of a sudden she stopped, right opposite the Boryna house, and had not the strength to turn her eyes away from the lights twinkling in the windows.

'But it's ours, ours ... how are we to leave ... Blacksmith'd soon get his hands on it ... no, I won't go from here ... I'll crouch in wait like a dog, whether Antek likes it or not ... Father won't live for ever, and maybe something will change ... I won't let my bairns be disregarded and I won't leave myself ... it's theirs after all ... ours ...' she brooded, gazing at the snow-covered garden from which the outline of buildings emerged: silvered white roofs, darkened walls, the steep peak of the hayrick standing out in the deep shadows behind the shed. It was as though her feet had taken root in the ice; she could neither move nor tear away her eyes or her fluttering heart.

The deep blue, quiet, frosty night, sprinkled with stars like silver dust, swathed the snowy ground, and the trees stood motionless, bent under their load of snow, sleeping, mysterious, in the silence engulfing the world, like the white shades of phantoms, like a dense haze. The snow shimmered, barely visible, and all sounds had died away, so that nothing louder than the murmur of the quivering stars, the pulse of the frost-bound earth or the sleepy breathing of the numbed trees trembled in the frosty air.

And still Hanka stood, oblivious to the passing of time or the sharp, biting cold. Her eyes were fixed on the house. She drank it in, embraced it in her heart, absorbed it with all the force of hunger and desire. She was startled awake by the crunch of snow. Someone had veered from the road to the pond and was heading towards her. A moment later she was face to face with Nastka Golebianska.

'Hanka!' she cried, astonished.

'You'd think I'd croaked and were haunting you already, you're that surprised!'

'Whatever next. I've not seen you in ages, so I was startled. Where are you headed?'

'Just the mill.'

'Me too, I'm taking Mateusz some supper.'

'Is he working at the mill now, learning to be miller?'

'Like he'd be a miller! He's at the sawmill they've put beside, and they've got plenty on and are working evenings already.'

They walked side by side, Hanka hardly saying a word and only Nastka twittering away. She was careful to say nothing of Boryna, though in truth Hanka hadn't asked – there was no way to, though she would willingly have listened.

'Does the miller pay well?'

'Mateusz gets five zlotys and fifteen groszy ...'

'That much! Five zlotys ...'

'Well, he does have charge of it all, so no wonder.'

Hanka said nothing, but going past the smithy where a red glow beat through the paneless windows and stained the snow red, she whispered:

'That Judas is always busy.'

'Got himself an apprentice, while he's forever out and about, in cahoots with the Jews at the forest, and they cheat people together.'

'What, are they clearing it already?'

'Are you stuck in the woods or what, that you don't know?'

'Not at all, but I don't go chasing village gossip.'

'Well then, for your information, they're felling, but on the bit that were bought.'

'Of course, folk won't let ours be touched ...'

'And who'll stop 'em? The Voyt's in with the manor, the Soltys too, everyone who's better off.'

'True, who's going to beat the moneybags, who'll oppose 'em ... Look in on us, Nastka, do.'

'Goodbye. I'll run over some time with my distaff.'

They parted by the miller's house. Nastka went down a way a little to the mill, and Hanka through the yard to the kitchen. She'd barely reached it when the dogs came flying and began to bark and press her against the wall, until Ewka came to help and ushered her in, but before they could get chatting, along came the miller's wife who said bluntly:

'Have you got business with my husband? He's at the mill.'

Hanka didn't wait and went at once, meeting him halfway. He took her into a room where she paid what she owed for the groats and flour.

'Eating up your cow!' he said, sweeping the money into a drawer.

'What's to do? Can't chew on stones.' She was cross.

'Your man's an idler, I'll tell you that.'

'Maybe, maybe not! What's he supposed to do? Where? For who?'

'Is there no threshing in the village?'

'He were neither a farmhand nor a labourer, so it's no wonder that he's not rushing to do it.'

'He'll come round to it yet, he will! I'm sorry for the man, though he glares like a wolf and he's pig-headed; got no family respect, but it's a pity ...'

'They did say there was work here, at yours ... I beseech you ... won't you take Antek on ... I beseech you ...' She burst into tears, clasping his legs, kissing his hands and pleading earnestly.

'Let him come, I won't beg him. There is work, but it's hard, sawing wood ...'

'He'll manage for sure, he's handy with everything, like no one else in the village ...'

'I know, that's why I'm saying he should come, but in any case you keep a poor eye on him, you do.'

She stood up in alarm, not understanding.

'Running after other women, when a man's got wife and children.'

She went pale and began to tremble.

'I'm telling the truth, he goes roaming the village at night. People have seen him more than once ...'

She sighed with enormous relief. She knew about that after all, and understood well that it was the memory of the wrong done him that assailed him by night and would not let him sleep ... and people immediately coloured it their way.

'He could've got to work by now, that'd clear his head of romancing.'

'He's a farmer's son, so ...'

'Oh, an heir, the choosy bugger, to go picking over work like a pig at a full trough. If he's that picky, he should have lived in peace with his father, and not gone chasing after Jagna ... It's no small sin, and shameful ...'

'What on earth can you be thinking, what?' she cried quickly.

'I'm telling you, that's how it is, the whole village knows, just ask!' he declared, loudly and quick, for he was hugely impetuous and always happy to be blunt with the truth.

'Is he to come, then?' she asked quietly.

'Tomorrow, if he likes. What's up with you, why are you snivelling?'

'No, no, just the frost ...'

She went back slowly, heavily, as though crushed to the ground; she could barely move her legs. The world had darkened and the snow grown so grey she could not find the path. In vain did she wipe away the tears freezing on her lashes, in vain ... She did not find it, could see nothing and simply walked on in that sudden, painful darkness – Jesus! So painful.

'Jagna, he's chasing Jagna ...'

She could not catch her breath, and her heart thumped like a terrified bird's, while her head was spinning and spinning, until she leaned against a tree by the pond and pressed against it hard, against the pain.

'Maybe it's not true, maybe the miller was fooling ...'

She latched on to this in her alarm, gripping with both hands.

'My Jesus! Are there not troubles enough, hardships enough, without this on my poor head, this too ...' she moaned bitterly and to quell the pain she began to run fast, to the point almost of losing her breath and consciousness, as though wolves were chasing her. She fell into the cottage, breathless and barely alive.

There was no sign of Antek.

The children were sitting in front of the fire, on Grandfather's sheepskin, and the old man was whittling them a windmill and amusing them.

'They brought the wool, Hanka, three sacks they brought ...'

She untied the sacks and on top of one she found a loaf of bread, a piece of pork fat and a good two quarts of groats.

'Jesus bless you for your kindness,' she whispered, touched, and straight away prepared a lavish supper and quickly put the children to bed.

The whole house was suddenly quiet, for at Weronka's they were already sleeping, and the old man, too, soon retired to the stove bench and fell asleep. Hanka, meanwhile, set up her wheel, sat down by the stove and began to spin. She sat long into the night, until first cockcrow, and all the while the miller's words ran through her like the thread through her fingers: 'He's chasing after Jagna, after Jagna.'

The wheel hummed quietly, steadily, tirelessly. The night peered in at the window with its frosty moonlit face and seemed to rattle at the panes and press against the walls with a sigh, and the cold slithered out of the corners, gripping her feet and spreading its grey mould over the clay floor. A cricket chirped behind the stove, pausing only when a child cried out in his sleep or tossed on the bed – and again a deep frozen silence! The frost squeezed ever harder as if with claws of iron, for the boards in the gables creaked repeatedly or the warped old walls would crack as though someone had fired a shot, or a beam swollen with frost would snap quietly; the frost had evidently penetrated the sill-beam through and through, so that it suddenly trembled painfully, and the whole house shrank, huddled to the ground and shivering with cold.

'Fancy it not entering my head! Aye, she's that lovely, plump and fetching, and me? Just a runt, all skin and bones – what have I got? Do I know how to captivate him? Even if I were to open every vein for him, what good would it do, when he's no heart for me. What have I got? What?'

She was overwhelmed with helplessness, utter helplessness, silent and painful, so terribly painful that she couldn't even cry, she hadn't the strength. She simply trembled inside like a small twisted tree, numb with cold, which can neither escape torment, nor plead for rescue, nor defend itself – just like that tree was Hanka's soul afflicted. She leaned her head on the spinning wheel, her hands fell by her sides, and she stared straight ahead, at her luckless fate, at her bitter powerlessness. She sat thus a long time; only a tear slipped now and then from under her purple eyelids, fell on to the yarn and froze there in a cruel rosary of distress.

But the next day she rose somewhat calmer. Did she have time, after all, for such worries, like some fine lady! Maybe it was as the miller said, or maybe it wasn't! Was she to wring her hands and cry and complain, when everything was resting on her shoulders, the children, the farm and every other disaster!

Who would see to it all if not her? She said a fervent prayer asking the Sorrowful Mother and the Lord Jesus to put things to rights, and vowed to go to Częstochowa in the spring and have three Masses said, and some day, when she was better off, take pounds of wax to church, to make into candles for the great altar.

Hanka felt huge relief, as though she'd been to confession and taken holy communion. She set to spinning energetically, but the day, though it was bright and sunny, dragged terribly for her and she was beset by worries over Antek.

He did not return until evening, not until supper, but was so drained, crestfallen and quiet, and greeted them so kindly, bringing rolls for the children, that she almost forgot her suspicions. When on top of that he chopped the chaff for fodder and helped with the chores as best he could, she was deeply touched, almost beyond telling.

But he did not say where he'd been or what he'd done, and indeed she dared not ask.

After supper Stach dropped in, as he often did, though Weronka forbade it, and a little later old Kłab appeared unexpectedly.

They were not a little surprised, as he was the first from the village to visit since they'd been turned out, so they understood that he was coming on some kind of business.

'Since no one's showing their face, I thought I'd come visiting,' he said simply.

They thanked him with sincere and deep gratitude.

They sat in a row on the bench, close to the fireplace, and chatted slowly and gravely, while old Bylica threw branches on the fire.

'Quite a frost, eh?' began Kłab.

'Hard to thresh without a sheepskin and gloves,' said Stach.

'And what's worse, there are wolves about.'

They looked at Kłab, astonished.

'It's true, this very night wolves dug under the Voyt's sty. Something must have frightened 'em, as they didn't take any pigs, but they'd scabbled out a pit right to the sill-beam. I went to see for myself at noon – there must have been at least five!'

'That's a sure sign of a hard winter.'

'Frost's only just come and wolves about already ...'

'I saw a load of prints by Wola, on that road past the mill, you know, like a whole pack had crossed the road. I took a look, thought it were the manor's hunting dogs, but it must have been wolves,' said Antek, excited.

'Were you at the felling?' Kłab asked.

'No, but people were saying that they're chopping down that wood that's been bought, at Wolf's Hollow.'

'Woodsmen told me the master won't be summoning anyone from Lipce for the work, out o' spite, for standing up for what's theirs.'

'And who else is going to cut it down for him, if not men from Lipce?' put in Hanka.

'Ah, my dear, with so many folk sitting at home waiting for work like its alms. Are there not plenty in Wola itself? Or those ragtags in Rudki? Those louts in Dębica! Let the squire only say the word, you'll get a hundred or two of the fittest peasants in a single day. While they're chopping on the bought land, let 'em chop, let 'em help themselves, there's not that much of it, and too far off for our folk.'

'And when they start on our woods?' asked Stacho.

'We'll not let 'em!' Kłab retorted curtly and firmly. 'We'll fight it out! Let the squire see who's stronger, him or all the folk together.'

They spoke of it no more; it stung and ate away too sharply at every liver. Only Bylica went on to stammer timidly:

'I know that landed sort at Wola well, I do, and the tricks they play ...'

'Let 'em, we're not children, they'll not succeed,' Kłab concluded.

They chatted too about Magda's banishment from the organist's, to which Kłab had to say:

'It's not human, in truth, but they cannot be setting up a hospice in the house either, for Magda's neither kith nor kin.'

They talked of this and that and parted quite late. On leaving, Kłab, in his blunt and direct way, said they should drop by at his, and should they be short of anything, they need only say. Whether it be foodstuffs, or fodder for the heifer, or even a few zlotys, it would be found, neighbourly like ...

The Anteks were left alone.

After much hesitation and several timid sighs, Hanka asked at last:

'Did you find any work?'

'No, I went to one manor and another, I asked around, but nothing ...' he replied quietly without raising his eyes, for truth be told, though he'd been here and there, he hadn't tried for work, but had loitered the time away.

They went to bed. The children were sleeping already, lying across the foot of the bed for warmth. The room was engulfed in darkness, only the light of the moon poured through the frozen sparkling panes and crossed the room in a shining beam. But they did not sleep; Hanka tossed from side to side and pondered: should she mention the sawmill now, or tomorrow morning?

'I looked, but even if I'd found something, I'm not leaving the village, knocking about the world like a stray dog,' he whispered after a long silence.

'I thought the same, just the same!' she cried joyfully. 'Why look for your bread out in the world? ... Not the worst-paid work comes up in the village, too. The miller told me he's got work for you at the sawmill, as soon as tomorrow, and he pays two zlotys and fifteen groszy.'

'You went asking?' he cried.

'No, I went to pay what I owed, and he said himself he were planning to send for you; I never said a thing,' she explained in alarm.

He made no reply and she too was silent; they lay motionless, side by side, without a word. Sleep had abandoned them completely – their thoughts were teeming somewhere in deepest secrecy inside, or their souls had melted into that dull, lifeless quiet. Dogs were barking in the village, faint and far, far away. Cockerels beat their wings and crowed from midnight, and a quiet murmur like the wind whispered above the house.

'You sleeping?' She shifted a little closer.

'When sleep's quit me.'

Antek lay on his back, hands behind his head, so close to her, and so far away in his heart, in his thoughts. He lay motionless, almost without breathing, forgetting everything, for Jagusia's eyes were looking out from the darkness once more and shone blue in the pale moonlight ...

And Hanka shifted still closer, pressing her hot face, her whole being, to his arm. No, there were no suspicions or resentment in her, no bitterness – just true love and delight alone. Full of trust and surrender, she nestled close to his heart.

'Jantoś, will you go to work tomorrow?' she asked with trepidation, for the sake of speaking, if only to hear his voice and reach for his soul.

'Maybe, aye, I must go, I must ...' he replied without thinking.

'Go, Jantoś, go,' she begged him gently and threw her arms about his neck and sought his barely breathing mouth with her hot lips.

But he did not even flinch, did not reply, did not feel her embrace, was not aware of her at all. Eyes wide open, he gazed into the eyes of that other one, into Jagna's blue eyes.

CHAPTER 3

It was late next morning, after breakfast, when the miller took Antek on; he left him in the yard among the logs heaped in great piles and went off to find Mateusz, who was just arranging the wood and setting the saws in motion. After exchanging a few words the miller called:

'You carry on here, but do whatever Mateusz says – he's in charge in place of me.' He then left quickly, as an unpleasant, piercing cold was rising from the river.

'You probably don't have an axe?' Mateusz hailed him, coming down with a friendly greeting.

'I didn't know, so I brought a hatchet.'

'That's like using your teeth. The wood's frozen and brittle as glass – you can't do a thing with a hatchet, it'll barely bite. I'll lend you an axe for today. You'll need to whet it, flat as you can ... see ... Bartek, make a pair with Boryna and get this oak seen to quick – the stuff at the saw will soon come through.'

From behind an enormous block of wood lying in the snow, a thin, tall stooped fellow straightened up, a pipe between his teeth, a grey fleece cap on his head, wearing a yellow sheepskin and clogs and red-striped trousers. Leaning on his shining axe, he whistled through his teeth and said cheerfully:

'Wed yourself to me and never fear – we'll make a pair that lives peaceable without shouting or brawls.'

'Fine forest! Trees like candles!'

'But knotty buggers, God help us, it's like they're tamped with flint. It's a rare day the axe isn't nicked. Only don't sharpen it too dry and smooth. You must pull it along the stone with the nap, one way only, the blade's sharper then. Iron's like a human being, you must find what it likes, then you'll lead it like a dog on a leash, wherever you please. Grindstone's in the mill by the miller ...'

In high on the space of a prayer, Antek stood ready for work alongside Bartek and began heaving logs and splitting the wood lengthways, to make straight edges, according to Bartek's tar marks. He said not a word, for it had hit him hard that he, a Boryna, was taking orders from such a one as Mateusz. But beggars cannot be choosers, so he only spat on his palms and kept an angry grip on the axe.

'Not bad, not bad!' Bartek noted.

Oh, he managed well enough, for sure; working wood was nothing new to him, and he had the knack, except the labour was hard for one unused to it, so that he quickly grew breathless and sweaty and threw off his sheepskin.

And since there was a hard frost that did not let up, and since he had to stand and fumble in the snow, his hands grew numb and stuck to the axe shaft and the time stretched on so that he could hardly wait for noon.

But at dinner he chewed on dried bread, drinking it down with water straight from the river, and did not even go inside, to the grinding mill, with the others. He feared bumping into his old cronies who'd brought grain to the mill and were waiting their turn. What, have them wonder at him, and maybe rejoice among themselves at his humiliation and wretchedness! Oh no! ... He stayed out in the cold, crouching down by the mill, chewing his bread and looking at the sawmill that stood right on the river, with only one corner against the mill building, so that the water from its four wheels crashed below in a dense green wall, driving the saws.

But he'd not yet rested nor recovered enough, when here was Mateusz, coming back from his dinner at the mill and shouting from a distance as he went:

'Everyone out! Everyone out!'

So like it or no, groaning at the short break, Antek had to hoist himself up and get to work with the rest.

They moved briskly, stung and spurred on smartly by the cold.

The mill clattered ceaselessly, and the water from beneath the wheels, covered in ice like green matted clumps of long tangled hair, crashed under the sawmill with a roar. The saws rasped evenly, without stopping, as though someone were chewing glass and spitting out yellow sawdust. Mateusz, meanwhile, was bustling about, indefatigable, preparing the logs, adjusting the flow of water, opening sluices, clamping the wood to the sawhorses, measuring, shouting all the while and urging workers on. He was everywhere, darting in his red-and-green striped spencer and grey sheepskin hat like a goldfinch at the hemp. He flitted about the forecourt on the trampled snow covered in shavings where they were tooling the wood, running to the mill here, accosting workers there. He marshalled, chivvied, laughed, bantered and whistled, yet put his back into the work and was to be seen most often on the deck by the saws, for the sawmill had no side walls and the light shone straight through. It hovered quite high over the river on four stout pillars against which the water beat so hard that the reed roof resting on the posts jiggled occasionally, like straw in the wind.

'Canny bastard!' murmured Antek in acknowledgement, but not without animosity.

'And not badly paid!' grunted Bartek.

They swung their arms and beat their hands against their shoulders to ward off the intensifying cold and worked in silence.

There were plenty of folk at work, but no time for chatting. Two manned the saws, rolling the sawn logs to the ground, and hoisting up new ones; two more sawed the rough ends and arranged planks in huge tiers, placing the thinner, wetter ones under the sheds to shelter them from the frost. Meanwhile, another two stripped the bark from the oaks, firs and spruces, so that time and again Bartek would call to them mockingly:

'Oi, you butcher-boys, you'll soon make master dog-catchers!'

They were annoyed at that, for they were no dog-skinners,¹ but there was no time to quarrel over the nickname. With Mateusz as taskmaster, they barely had a chance to slip away to the mill to warm their numbed hands, and would return at a gallop if they did, and as the work itself demanded.

It was well after dusk when Antek trudged home, and so frozen, exhausted and drained, with all his bones aching, that immediately after supper he climbed under the quilt and slept like a log.

Hanka did not have the heart to question him about anything, but humoured him as best she could. She shushed the children repeatedly and chided the old man not to clomp his boots. She herself walked barefoot about the chamber so as not to wake him, and at dawn when he was getting ready for work, she boiled a pan of milk to go with his potatoes, so that he could eat properly and warm up better.

'Dammit, my bones ache and I can barely move!' he declared.

'That's but for now, you're not used to it, unpractised ...' the old man explained.

'It'll pass, I know that. Hanus, will you bring us some dinner?'

'I will, you can't be dashing all this way. I'll bring some ...'

He soon left, for he had to show up for work at daybreak sharp.

And so began his days of hard and toilsome labour.

No matter how cruel the frost raking the ground, no matter how gales might storm and blast or how hard it snowed until you could not open your eyes, no matter if a thaw came, forcing you to stand all day in soggy snow with a nasty damp cold climbing into your bones, no matter if the snow whirled so that you could scarce see your own axe – still you had to leap from your bed each morning and run and toil all day long, until your bones creaked and every single vein strained with weariness ... and get a move on besides, since four saws devoured the wood that fast they could barely keep up and Mateusz harrying them all the while.

But it was not this that incensed him, not the hard work, nor the evil gales, biting frosts, foul weather or cruel snows. Little by little he grew used to that, for when a person sets his mind to it, then hell itself is tolerable – so wise people say. The one thing he could not bear was that Mateusz, with his constant badgering, was in charge.

The others no longer paid heed, but he, every time he heard it, boiled with rage, and sometimes snarled back so that the other's eyes flashed. Or again Mateusz would pick on everything as if on purpose, not straight to his face, but somehow always hitting a weak spot, until Antek's skin tingled and his fists would clench, but he checked himself still as best he could, calmed down and just stowed these barbs in his memory. He well knew that Mateusz was only waiting for an opportunity to dismiss him ...

The work was neither here nor there for Antek, but he'd not let himself be pushed about and drubbed by just anyone – by riff-raff such as Mateusz.

Suffice to say, they grew more hostile daily, for at the very root of their anger, lodged like a painful splinter, was Jagusia. Both of them had long pursued her, back even before spring, or maybe even since Shrovetide, as if harnessed together, jostling secretly, but each fully aware of the other. Except that Mateusz did so almost in open view of all and spoke aloud of his affections, whereas Antek had to hide, and so a dull, burning envy scalded his heart.

They'd never been friendly, but always wary of each other and goading each other in front of folk, since each thought himself the strongest man in the village, but now their mutual animosity and ire grew by the day, so that within a week or so they no longer greeted each other, but merely passed by, eyes glinting, like two enraged wolves.

Mateusz was neither a bad fellow nor standoffish; on the contrary, he had a generous heart and a helping hand. Only he was too self-assured, lorded it too much over others and held them in little esteem. He had another fault besides, in that he thought himself a catch such that no girl had yet refused him, which he liked to flaunt and tell other people, just to prove he was best in all things. So now, too, he relished saying how Antek worked for him and obeyed him in everything, always looking him in the eye, humble as a rabbit – anything not to be given the sack.

While it was strange indeed to those who knew Antek, to their mind the man had humbled and submitted himself so as not to lose his work at any cost, whereas others maintained that this was not yet the last of it, as Antek never forgot and would get his own back, if not today, then tomorrow, and they were even willing to bet that he would beat Mateusz to a pulp.

Of course, Antek knew nothing of this talk, for he never called in anywhere, passed his old cronies by without a word, and went straight home after work and back again – but he felt keenly that it must be so, for he saw right through Mateusz.

'I'll fix you, scum, like a cabbage that even them dogs won't eat. You won't be lording and preening when I've softened your windpipe,' he burst out one day at work, so that Bartek overheard and said:

'Leave be, they pay him to harangue us!' The old man did not understand.

'Even a dog gets my goat when it barks for nothing.'

'You take it too much to heart, you'll end up with a scorched liver, and I see you toil too feverish as well ...'

'Because I'm cold,' he retorted carelessly.

'Slowly does it, in everything, orderly, slowly. Even the Lord Jesus, who could have made the world in but a day, chose to take a week, taking his rest ... Work's not a bird, it shan't fly off – why strain yourself for the miller or anyone else? Who's forcing you? ... And Mateusz is but a watchdog on guard – will you be angry at it for its barking?'

'I've said how I see it. Where were you in the summer that I never saw you about the village?' he asked, to shift the conversation.

'Doing this and that, seeing a bit o' God's world, feeding the eyes and growing the soul,' he said, slowly squaring the wood on the other side with his axe, standing up straight occasionally and stretching until his joints cracked. He never took the pipe from between his teeth, and talked contentedly.

'I were working with Mateusz at the new manor, but since he were rushing me and it were spring and the sun smelled good, I packed it in, and there were people walking to Kalwaria, so I went along, for the indulgences and to see something of the world.'

'Is it far to yon Kalwaria?'

'Two weeks walking, past Kraków, but I never got there. In one village we stopped over, a farmer were putting up a cottage, and knew as much about it as a goat knows about pepper! I were cross to see it, cursed the wretch for spoiling that much wood, and stayed on, since he asked. In less than two months I had him a house fine as a manor, till he wanted to wed me off to his sister, a widow next door, with five morgen.

'An old 'un, I'll bet.'

'Not young, for sure, but well enough, except that she were a little bald, crooked and with gimlet eyes, but her face were smooth as a loaf nibbled by mice for a week or two, a fine woman, good. I got plenty of grub – eggs scrambled with sausage, vodka, lard, other tasty bites, and she became that frisky with me she were ready to get under the quilt ... but in the night I scarpered ...'

'Why not marry? It's always five morgen ...'

'And the dead husband's sheepskin. What do I want with a woman? I'm long sick of the whole tribe! All they do is shout, yell, rush about, like magpies on a fence. You say one word, she comes back with twenty like she's shaking a handful of haulm ... You have reasoning, she sweeps, unthinking, with her tongue. You speak as one human being to another, and she neither understands, nor ponders, but yatters any old thing. They say the Lord Jesus gave women only half a soul and it must be true – and let the devil rule the other half ...'

'But happen there are clever ones, there are ...' he said, a little melancholy.

'Happen there are white crows too, only no one's seen one!'

'Did you never have a wife then, eh?'

'I did, I did!' He broke off suddenly and straightened up, his grey eyes gazing into the distance. He was old now, withered as wood shavings, wiry and erect – though somewhat stooped at the moment. His pipe slipped about between his teeth and he blinked his eyes quickly.

'Coming down, pull it in!' yelled the man at the saws.

'Faster – hey, Bartek! Don't stand about, the saws will stop!' yelled Mateusz.

'Ha, that stupid – can't go any quicker than can be managed. A crow climbs on to the church, croaks and thinks it's the priest at the pulpit,' he muttered angrily, but something must have ailed him inside, for he rested more frequently and sighed, waiting for noon.

Luckily, it soon came, for the women were appearing with their double pots and Hanka was coming round the corner of the mill. The saws stopped and everyone went to eat at the grinding mill. Antek, meanwhile, since he'd drunk more than one flagon on occasion with the miller and knew him well, took himself off to the miller's little room. He neither fled people any more nor shunned them, but gave them such looks that they avoided him in any case.

In heat such that it was barely possible to breathe sat a few villagers in sheepskins, chatting cheerfully. They were people from more distant villages who'd brought grain and were waiting for it to be ground. They heaped peat into the stove, which was glowing red, and gossiped, smoking cigarettes and making the whole room foggy.

Antek sat on some sacks by the window, took out the pots from between his knees and greedily ate the cabbage-with-peas, followed by potato dumplings and milk, while Hanka squatted beside her husband and gazed at him tenderly. He'd grown thin from the work, darkened, and the skin on his face was peeling here and there from toiling in the frost, but despite all this he seemed more handsome to her than anyone in the world. And he surely was: tall, straight, slim, slender of waist and broad of shoulder, and lithe – he had a thin, longish face, a nose like a hawk's beak, but not so curved, great grey-green eyes, and brows that went almost from temple to temple, as though drawn right across his forehead with charcoal, so that when he furrowed them in anger, it was terrible to see. His forehead was lofty, though half covered in evenly cut, dark, almost black hair. His face, like all the other men's, was clean-shaven, so that his white teeth gleamed between red lips like a string of beads ... He was handsome through and through, so that she could never get enough of looking at him.

'Could your father not bring it? Will you be running this distance every day!'

'They were shovelling muck from the heifer's stall. Anyroad, I wanted to bring it myself!'

She always managed things so that she could bring the dinner herself and at least take a look at him.

'What news?' he asked her, as he finished eating.

'Nothing much! I've spun the sack of wool already and taken five *proniks*² of it to the organist's wife. She were well pleased ... Pietruś is a bit feverish, won't eat and is forever whingeing.'

'Stuffed himself, that's all.'

'For sure, for sure ... And Jankiel came by asking about the geese ...'

'Will you sell?'

'As if, and go buying more in spring!'

'As you think best – that's your concern.'

'They've been scrapping at the Wachniks' again, priest had to be fetched, to smooth things over ... and a calf choked on a carrot at the Pacześes', so they say ...'

'What's it to me,' he muttered impatiently.

'The organist's been doing the rounds, for the sheaves,'³ she said after a moment, hesitating now.

'What did you give?'

'Two handfuls of combed flax and four eggs ... He said that if we need it, he'll give us a cart of oats and wait till summer for the money or labour in kind. I didn't take it, for why should we from him ... After all ... we're owed fodder from your father, we took only two carts, and from that many morgen ...'

'I'll not go reminding him and you're not to neither. Take some from the organist in exchange for work, and if not, we'll sell the last cow. I'll not beg Father for anything while I live. Understand?'

'I understand, take it from the organist ...'

'Or maybe I'll earn enough – just don't go crying in front o' folk!'

'Aye, nor do I, no ... but get half a bushel of barley for porridge from the miller. It'll come out cheaper than buying it ready ground.'

'Right, I'll ask today and stay one evening for the grinding.'

Hanka went out and he remained to smoke, but without joining in the conversation with the other men, who were just then talking of the master's brother from Wola.

'Jacek he were called, I knew him well!' called Bartek, entering the little room at that moment.

'You'll know then that he's back from distant lands.'⁴

'I never. I even thought he were long dead!'

'Well, he's living, for it's some two weeks since he arrived.'

'He's back, but they're saying that he's not quite right in the head. Doesn't want to live at the manor and moved to the forest to the woodsman's and does everything for himself, cooking and washing, seems strange to everyone, and in the evening he's forever playing the fiddle. He's always to be seen on the road or in a graveyard, where he plays ...'

'They told me that he goes about all the villages asking everywhere after some Kuba ...'

'Kuba! There's many a dog named Rover.'

'He don't say it's a nickname. He's looking for a Kuba who was supposed to have carried him from the fighting and saved him from death!'

'There were a Kuba here, who used to go to the woods with the gentlemen, but he died!' threw in Antek and rose, as Mateusz was already yelling outside:

'Out with you – will you be idling till evening!'

Antek was so incensed he ran out and shouted:

'Stop yelling for nothing, we can all hear.'

'Guzzled a load o' meat, so he's easing his potbelly by sounding off,' said Bartek.

'Eh ... he's yelling to suck up to the miller,' someone added.

'Lazing over their food and debating, scum pretending to be farmers, and not a decent pair of trews between 'em,' Mateusz went on muttering.

'That's you he's drinking to, Antek!'

'Shut your mouth and keep your tongue behind your teeth before I cut it off, and keep off the farmers!' yelled Antek, ready now for anything.

But Mateusz fell silent and only shot murderous looks like a thug. He said not a word all day to anyone, but kept a keen eye on Antek's work, tracking his every step. He found nothing to pick on, however, since the other worked so diligently that the miller himself, who looked in several times a day, noticed it and at the first weekly pay gave him three whole zlotys extra.

Mateusz raged afterwards, and was at the miller's throat, but the other said:

'I'm content with you, and with him, and with anyone who's a solid worker.'

'You did that to get at me.'

'I did it because he's worth as much as Bartek, and maybe more. I'm a fair man, and I let everyone know it.'

'To the devil with the work then, mister – you can do it yourself,' he threatened.

'Go ahead, search for other bread if mine is not to your taste, go on. Boryna can manage the sawmill and for four zloty a day,' said the miller with a laugh, for he was contriving all along to gain a cheaper worker.

Mateusz soon figured that the miller would not give way nor allow himself to be threatened, so he insisted no more, but hid his anger towards Antek deep within his bosom, where it scorched him like a living flame, yet he became gentler and more understanding towards folk, which they were quick to notice, while Bartek only spat and said to the others:

'Idiot, like a mutt that couldn't get a grip on the boot, got it in the teeth, and now fawns on the wearer. He thought he were in favour, but they'll chase him off same as anyone, soon as sommat better turns up, that's always the way with the rich ...'

But to Antek, it was all the same. He was neither happy at the raise, nor particularly pleased that Mateusz had gone soft and that the village was mocking him, as they were saying at work. It was less to him than the year gone by. He wasn't working for the pay – that only pleased Hanka – but because he felt like it, and had he felt like lying lazily, belly up, then he would, whatever might be going on. And since he'd taken a shine to the work, he simply lost himself in it and went about with no urging like a horse in harness, going round and round until it was stopped.

So each day followed the next, week after week, in hard and ceaseless toil, right until Yuletide, until his soul slowly quietened and somehow turned to ice, so that he was quite unlike his former self. People marvelled at it and were of different opinions. But it was all on the surface only, for the eyes of others, and underneath things were quite different – like quick deep water that the frost traps under ice and which the snow covers, but is always babbling, humming, murmuring, so that with no warning the shell cracks and the waters burst free ... So it was with him: he worked, laboured, handed every last grosz to his wife, sat at home come evening, and was good as never before – quiet, peaceful, playing with the children, helping on the farm, saying not a bad word to anyone, disavowing no one and seeming to have forgotten all injuries. But he did not lead Hanka's heart astray in all this, no indeed. Aye, she rejoiced at this change, for sure, and thanked God for it fervently and fussed about him as best she could, forever glancing into his eyes, guessing what he might need – she was his most faithful and attentive servant – but she often caught sight of his sad looks, often in alarm she'd overhear his quiet sighs, often her hands would drop and her heart freeze as she looked about her, longing to foresee the direction from which unhappiness might come. For she felt sure that something terrible was weighing on him, something he was holding in by force, which clung to him, concealed itself, and was sucking and sucking on his soul ...

Antek, meanwhile, said not a word, nothing of whether things were good for him or bad. He came straight home from work, leapt up at dawn as soon as they rang the rolate,⁵ so that every day he passed the lit-up church, every day he paused opposite the porch to hear the playing of the organ, the melodious voices, those quiet, resonating, poignant sounds that seemed to echo out of the frost, as though emerging from the grey of daybreak, as though chiming out of the copper dawn. From the icy veils and frozen earth they rose, like a yearning, broken dream from a long sleep, the hard sleep of winter, and every day he quickened his step so as not to be seen listening, or appear engrossed, and dashed along the other side of the pond, the longer way – anything not to pass his father's house and to avoid meeting anyone.

Anyone!

That's why on Sundays too he sat still as a stone in the house, despite Hanka's pleas to come to church with her. No, no, no. He feared meeting Jagna; he knew very well that he would not be able to bear it, to endure it!

Besides, he knew from Bartek, with whom he was quite friendly, and, he himself felt it, that the village was still preoccupied with him, watching and marking his every move like a thief's, as if they'd conspired against him. Often he'd notice eyes peering around corners, he'd sense how people turned to look at him, the darting, curious, inquisitive glances wanting to reach into the depths of his soul and fish out every thought and examine it through and through. They pained him, those glances, for they seemed to drill right into his soul; they pained him sorely.

'You'll get nothing, you scum, not a thing,' he whispered with hatred, increasingly obstinate in his anger against everyone, and so avoiding people all the more.

'I don't need anyone. I'm on such terms with myself I can scarce manage that,' he told Kłab, who reproached him for never calling by.

Antek had spoken true that he was hard pressed to tackle himself, true. He'd taken himself firmly in hand, forced his soul into an iron harness and held it firm, would not release it from its bonds – but increasingly his soul now fainted from fatigue, and increasingly he longed to chuck it all in and leave everything to fate. Be it for good or ill, it was all the same to him, for life revolted him and sadness devoured him – a deep sadness that had fixed its claws like a hawk into his heart, tearing and shredding it.

It was hard for him, this yoke: tedious, cramped and stifling, like a fenced-in, fettered horse, like a dog on a chain, like ... no words for it!

He felt like a fruitful tree broken by a gale and condemned to annihilation, withering slowly in the very heart of a flourishing, blossoming orchard.

For here were folk living all around, here was the village, simmering with its customary deep hum, rippling like running water, spilling over constantly in a steady, abundant, bracing stream. Lipce lived its ordinary daily life. Here a christening at the Wachniaks', there a betrothal at the Kłabs', without music perhaps, but with as much rejoicing as Advent permitted. Or then a death at some cottage – that Bartek's, for instance, whose dear son-in-law had beaten him so soundly after potato digging that he wheezed and grouched and ended up in Abraham's bosom to take his beer. Or there was Jagustynka, taking her children to court again over her rights. Or other diverse matters, but something new in almost every homestead, so that folk had something to debate, to laugh at or bemoan. Or again the women would gather in various cottages during the long winter evenings with their distaffs to spin – what laughter there was, my Jesus, what fun, what chatter, what shrieks, with merry capers that could be heard all along the road! And what quarrels everywhere, what friendships, trysts, wooings, loiterings before the cottages, swindling, brawling, droll talk – like an anthill or a swarming beehive – so that the village fairly hummed inside.

And each lived in their own way, as they saw fit, as best they could, alongside their neighbours, as the Lord God had commanded.

This one lived in poverty, tribulation and striving; that one made merry and chinked glasses readily with friends; this one put on airs and graces and was forever on their high horse; that one chased the girls; this one was ailing and making ready for the priest's byre; that one lazed beside a warm stove; some were happy, some knew sorrow, some were neither this nor that – and all lived bustling noisily, with their whole hearts and their whole souls.

Antek alone seemed cut off from the village, cut off from folk. He felt timid and hungry like an alien bird, which, though it flapped about outside the lamp-lit windows, though it sighed at the sight of full hayricks, though its soul longed for company, would not fly in; it circled, peeped, eavesdropped, fed on its torment, drank of its yearning, but would not fly in.

Unless the Lord Jesus were to transform things ... once and for all.

But he was still afraid to think on such a transformation.

A few days before Yuletide, he met the blacksmith early one morning. He made to avoid him, but the other stepped in his path and was first to stretch out his hand, saying softly, as though with reproach:

'I was waiting for you to come, as to kin ... I could have advised you, helped you, though I'm not flush myself ...'

'You could've come yourself and helped!'

'How ... was I to impose myself, and have you see me off like Józka ...'

'Aye, them's always slow who feel no pain.'

'No pain! The same pain's met us both, so it hurts the same too.'

'Don't start with your tricks to my face. Ha, thinks he's talking to an idiot ...'

'As I love God, it's the whole truth I'm saying.'

'A fox, the bugger, sprints along, sniffs around, wanders about and sweeps his tracks clean with his tail, so that you cannot even catch the wind behind him and avenge the damage ...'

'It's because I were at the wedding, that's why you're mad at me! True, so I was, I don't deny it, but I had to go, the priest himself were urging and compelling me, so as no offence to God would come of it, with the children here and the father there.'

'The priest made you go. Tell that to another idiot – he might believe you, but not me. You're ripping off the old man for that friendship, every chance you get. You never leave with empty hands ...'

'Only fools don't accept what's offered, but I don't condemn you, no. The whole village'll tell you, ask Jagustynka, she's forever at the old man's. I even spoke to Father about being reconciled with you ... it can be done ... fixed ... sorted to a shine ...'

'Go placate the dogs, not me, d'you hear! I didn't ask you for war, so don't go wedding me with peace neither. Hark at him, my best friend, he is! You'd make peace all right, to strip the last sheepskin off my back ... I'm telling you again: you leave me be, stay out o' my way, for if I get angry, I'll rip out those squirrel-red locks and tickle your ribs so's the gendarmes won't even defend you, though you keep company with them. You remember that!'

He turned and strode off without even looking round at the other, who stood with his mouth open in the middle of the road.

'Damn swindler, hand in glove with the old man and comes over all friendly with me, and he'd have us both out with our bundles if he could.'

He couldn't calm down for some time after this encounter, and things had somehow not gone his way that day since the morning. He'd barely started with the adze, when he nicked it on a knot, and then just after midday a fallen tree crushed his foot. It was a true miracle that the bones hadn't snapped, but he had to pull off his boot and apply ice, for it swelled and hurt sorely ... What's more, Mateusz was mad as a dog today, quarrelling with everyone; everything was wrong, nothing was good enough. He yelled and chivvied and, in Antek's case, was clearly spoiling for a fight, so that things were but a hair's breadth from something worse.

To cap it all, it just so happened that Franek, pleading lack of time, hadn't even done the barley, which was to have been ready today and which Hanka had been bending his ear about daily.

At home, too, things were at odds, with Hanka weepy and dejected, because Pietruś was on fire with fever, and she'd had to summon Jagustynka to fumigate the boy and measure him, for it had to be shifted somehow.⁶

She came during suppertime, sat by the fire, looked furtively about the room and was itching to chat, but since both Hanka and Antek were taciturn, she soon set to examining the boy and treating him ...

'I'll go to the mill and keep an eye, otherwise the grinding'll not get done!' said Antek, taking his cap.

'Couldn't Father go help tip it in?'⁷

'I'll go myself – it's more likely to get ground!' He hurried out, cross, agitated and as tossed about inside as a lone tree in a gale. What's more, everything in the house irritated and annoyed him, and Jagustynka's probing, cunning eyes most of all.

It was a quiet, frostless evening, for it had grown milder since morning. There were few stars, only one or two flickering in the distance here and there, as though through a curtain. The wind was blowing from the woods, followed by a dull distant hum, as though ushering in a change of weather. The dogs kept barking in the village, and snow kept slipping from the trees in flurries ... Smoke drifted along the road; the air was damp and bitter.

It was just before the Yuletide holiday, so there were a fair few people in the mill. Those whose grain was being ground were marking time on the porch, the rest sat in the miller's room, with Mateusz in the middle of them, obviously recounting some curious thing, for they kept bursting out laughing.

On the very threshold, Antek spun on his heel and went to the mill to look for Franek.

'He's down on the dyke, having it out with Magda, you know – the one turned out from the organist's! The miller's ready to throw him out if he meets the girl one more time in the mill. She's been hanging about here for nights at a time. Where's she supposed to go, poor thing!' explained one villager.

'What we pursue in spring, we flee in winter!' added another, with a laugh. Antek sat down under the bin into which the finest flour was ground, and so directly opposite the open door of the miller's room, where he could see Mateusz's back and people's heads bent towards him, listening. He could even have heard what they were saying, for it was not far, except the rumble of the mill prevented him, nor did he wish to hear.

He stretched out a little on the sacks and dozed from tiredness.

The mill clattered ceaselessly, shuddering and shaking, every deck at work, the wheels beating hard like a hundred women smacking their laundry with sticks without pause, while the water tumbled, gibbering, over them, churning and crashing, foam and snowy splinters pounding into the river with a roar.

Antek waited maybe an hour for Franek, but got up eventually to look for him outside and to shake off the sleepiness tormenting him. The way out led past the miller's room. He crossed and his hand was already on the latch when he stopped suddenly, hearing Mateusz holding forth.

'... and the old man boils the milk himself, and gets the tea and brings it to the quilt for her ... They're saying he even minds the cows and does all the chores with Jagustynka, for God forbid she should dirty her hands ... Apparently he's even bought her a po, so she don't catch cold going behind the barn ...'

There was a burst of loud laughter and the jokes flew like hail. Antek, not knowing why himself, retreated to his former place, fell on to the sacks and stared mindlessly at the long red smudge of light beaming through the open doorway of the room. He heard nothing: the clatter muted conversations, the mill shook ceaselessly; dim in the grey cloud of flour, the lamps hanging from the ceiling glimmered here and there through the white dust, yellow as the eyes of a cat lying in wait, and trembled now and then on their ropes. But he could not sit still for long; again he rose and quietly came right up to the door on his toes and listened.

'... she explained it all to him,' Mateusz was saying. 'She happened to be hurrying to cross the fence and that's why – Dominikowa confirmed that it often happens to girls, that it happened to her too in her girlhood ... Every one of 'em now can put the blame on a sprightly climb ... and the old goat believed it. Such a know-all, and he believed it ...'

They laughed so hard, their guffaws soaring about the mill, that they were almost prostrate.

Antek shifted closer, was almost on the threshold, white as a corpse, with clenched fists, tense, and ready to leap ...

'And what they were saying about Antek,' Mateusz took up again, when the laughter had subsided, 'that he and Jaguś knew each other well, it's not true – I know better. I heard him myself, whining at the door of the storeroom like a dog, till she had to chase him off with a broom. He latched on to her like a burr to a dog's tail, but she chased him off ...'

'You saw that?' someone asked. 'They're saying something else in the village ...'

'Wasn't I there more than once in her storeroom? Wasn't she always complaining about him to me?'

'You lying dog!' Antek yelled, stepping across the threshold.

Mateusz sprang at him instantly, but before he could get his bearings, Antek had leapt on him like a mad wolf, grabbing him by the collar with one hand and choking him until he lost both his breath and his voice. With the other he seized him round the middle, tore him from the spot like a bush, kicked open the door and carried him quickly behind the mill, to where the river was fenced off, and hurled him with all his might so that four of the pickets smashed like straw and Mateusz fell as heavy as a brick into the water.

There were shouts and uproar, for the river in that place was fast and deep. People rushed to the rescue and pulled him out fast, but he was unconscious – they barely brought him round. The miller soon flew in and in a couple of prayers they'd fetched Ambrozy. Some villagers had gathered together and carried him to the miller's house for he kept fainting and was vomiting blood. They even sent for the priest, he looked in such a bad way, and they thought he wouldn't see the morning. Antek, meanwhile, when they'd carried off Mateusz, sat calmly in his place by the fire and warmed his hands, chatting with Franek, who had turned up – and when people drifted back and things had quietened somewhat, he said loud enough for all to hear, and forcefully, so that each of them would remember:

'Anyone else who attacks or offends me will get the same or worse!'

No one replied; they looked at him with deep awe, even respect. Why, picking up a fellow like Mateusz as easily as though he were a sheaf of hay, and carrying and throwing him in the water! No one had ever heard of such a strongman! ... If they'd fought and wrestled, if one had overcome the other, given him the works, even killed him – that would have been commonplace! But to pick him up by the ears like a puppy and chuck him in the water! The cracked ribs against the pickets were one thing, they would heal, but the shame, the shame of it, Mateusz would surely not endure! ... To shame a person that way for the rest of his life!

'Well, well, my friends – that's not been seen before,' they whispered among themselves.

But Antek took no notice of them; he ground the barley and headed home around midnight. The lights were still shining at the miller's, in the room where they'd put Mateusz.

'You'll not boast any more, you scum, that you've been in Jagna's storeroom!' he whispered with hatred and spat.

Back home, he said nothing, though Hanka was still up, busy spinning. In the morning he did not go to work, feeling sure that they would dismiss him, but right after breakfast, in rushed the miller himself.

'Come on to work, your business with Mateusz is your own affair, nothing to me, but the mill cannot stand idle till he's well again. You direct the work, four zlotys and dinner I'll pay you.'

'I will not – give me the same as Mateusz and I'll run it just as well.'

The miller got mad, haggled, but had to consent, there was nothing for it, and took him straight back and off they went.

Hanka understood none of it yet, for she knew nothing.

CHAPTER 4

Christmas Eve. The whole of Lipce had been seething with feverish activity since daybreak.

In the night, or perhaps towards dawn, the frost had strengthened its grip again, and since this followed a few days of soft damp mists, the trees were loaded with rime like glass crystals, or maybe the whitest down. The sun had managed to break through and shone against the blue sky as though veiled in the thinnest of transparent mists, though cool and pale as the Host hidden in the monstrance, giving no heat, indeed quite the opposite, for the frost took during the day, grew and dug in so ferociously it snatched the air from your lungs. All creatures moved about in a cloudy haze of breathy steam, but the whole world was lit up in sunshine, steeped in such glimmering, glowing rays, in such glittering brightness, as though someone had scattered the snows with diamond dew, it made the eyes ache to behold.

The encircling fields, heaped with snow, lay white and sparkling, yet silent and lifeless. Sometimes a lone bird would flap across the shimmering whiteness, its black shadow flickering over the strips below, or a flock of partridges bickered under the snow-laden bushes and timidly, watchfully, drew furtively closer to human dwellings, to the full hayricks; or again, though rarely, the dark shape of a hare would hop over the drifts, stand on its hind legs and scratch at the hardened snowy shell to get at the grain, but startled by the barking of dogs, back it would scamper to the hoar-frosted forest, branches heavy with snow, stiff with cold! The vast snowy plains stretched empty and mute. Far off, in the distant blue, villages could be seen, grey orchards and thickets darkened, frozen streams glimmered.

A penetrating cold, bright in the burnished frost, breathed over the whole world, piercing the icy silence.

No cry severed the frozen stillness of the fields, no living voice echoed, not even the sighing of the wind rustled the dry sparkling snows. Sometimes the infrequent tolling of a bell came from the roads lost in drifts, and the scrape of a sleigh, but so faint and distant that no sooner had you made it out, determined whence it came, than it was over, disappearing completely in the quietness.

But the Lipce lanes, on both sides of the pond, swarmed noisily with people; the air quivered with a joyful, infectious holiday mood, filling folk and even the cattle with excitement. Shouts rang out in the clear frosty air like music, resonant merry laughter flew from one end of the village to the other, hearts gushed with joy. The dogs rolled madly in the snows, barking with delight, and chased after the crows that hung about the houses; horses neighed in the stables, wistful drawn-out bellows escaped from the byres, and even the snow seemed to crunch cheerfully underfoot. Sleights' runners squealed along the hard, polished roads, smoke rose in blue pillars straight as a gunshot, while cottage windows dazzled in the play of sunlight – and everywhere was full of hustle and bustle, children, commotion, the gagging of geese flapping around the ice holes, and shouts. There were people everywhere, filling the roads, in front of houses, by the fences, while here and there across the snowy gardens women's skirts flashed red as they darted from cottage to cottage, jostling the trees and bushes time and again so that they scattered streams of snow, showering clouds of silver dust.

Even the mill wasn't rumbling today but had stopped for the entire holiday, with only a cold glaze of clear water ringing noisily through the opened sluice. Somewhere beyond it, in the swamps and marshes, the cries of wild ducks rose through the dusty mists as whole flocks circled in the sky.

And in every cottage, at the Szymons', the Mackows', the Voyts', the Klags' – who could count or name them all – chambers were aired and washed and scrubbed and fresh pine needles sprinkled in rooms and hallways and even on the snow at the thresholds, and some even whitewashed their blackened stoves. And everywhere bread and special sweet rolls were being hastily baked, herring prepared and poppy seeds ground in clay pots to make dumplings.

For Yuletide was coming, the feast of the Christ Child, the joyful miraculous day of Jesus' mercy on the world, a blessed respite in the long working days, rousing folk, poor things, from their winter numbness, shaking them free of the drab and grey, their souls rising in joyous excitement to greet the Lord's birth!

At the Borynas', too, the same hubbub, bustle and preparations were afoot.

The old man had gone off to town before daybreak to shop with Pietrek, whom he'd taken on for the horses in Kuba's place.

In the cottage, they were scurrying about busily. Józka sang quietly to herself and snipped all manner of clever cuttings from coloured paper to stick on the beams or on to the frames of the pictures, which then looked as though painted in bright colours and fair dazzled the eyes! And Jagna, her sleeves rolled past her elbows, kneaded dough in a trough and with her mother's help was making strudels as long as the parsley rows in the vegetable garden. The bread was whiter, from sifted flour, and she had to look lively as the dough was already surging and there were loaves to be shaped, and Józka's work to be minded, or the cheese and honey cake to be checked that was keeping warm under the quilt and waiting for the oven, and then she'd fly to the other side of the house to the *szabaśnik*,¹ in which a mighty fire was blazing.

Witek had been ordered to mind the oven and add firewood, but they'd not had a glimpse of him since breakfast, when he'd immediately disappeared somewhere. In vain did Józka or Dominikowa search the whole farmstead, calling him. The rascal didn't answer; he was sitting beyond the hayrick in the middle of nowhere under the bushes, setting snares for partridges, disguising them with a thick scattering of chaff. Łapa was with him and yon sick stork he'd rescued back in autumn and tended, sheltered, fed and taught numerous tricks, and which had grown so companionable he need only give a certain whistle and the bird followed him much as did Łapa, with whom he was the best of friends, and all three would go off rattling together in the stable.

Rocho, meanwhile, whom Boryna had taken in for the whole of the holiday, had been at church since morning, and together with Ambrozy he had dressed all the altars and walls with fir branches that the priest's farmhand had carted over.

Noon was approaching by the time Jagna had finished with the bread, arranged the loaves on the board and was patting and brushing them with egg white to stop them cracking too much in the oven, when Witek stuck his head round the door and shouted:

'Carollers comin'!²

Jasio, the organist's older boy, the one who went away to school, had been distributing wafers since morning, together with his younger brother. They were at the porch when Jagna spied them and there was no time to tidy up as they entered with a 'Praised be'.

Terribly flustered that the room was a mess, she could but hide her bare arms under her apron and invite them to sit and rest, for they were carrying great baskets and the younger one was dragging heavy bags that were far from empty.

'We've still got half the village to do and not much time!' He resisted the invitation.

'But please at least warm yourself, Master Jaś, you're frozen!'

'Maybe a drop of hot milk,' suggested Dominikowa. They protested but sat themselves anyway on a crate by the window. Jaś, meanwhile, was staring at Jagna so that she blushed and began quickly to pull her sleeves down over her arms, so that he too reddened like a beetroot and began hunting about for wafers in his basket, and took out a better and thicker packet, wound in gold thread and interspersed with coloured wafers. Jagna took it through her apron and placed it on a plate by the crucifix, and then brought out a good half-peck³ of flax seed and six eggs.

'Have you been back long, Master Jaś?' she said.

'Only since Sunday, three days ago.'

'You must be tired of that there schooling?' asked her mother.

'A bit, but not long now, only till spring!'

'And your good mother were saying at my wedding that you are going for a priest, Master Jaś ...'

'Yes, from Easter, yes!' he said more quietly and lowered his eyes.

'Good Lord – well, there's a comfort in the making for your father! There's a joy that a priest you'll be, and God willing, perhaps even in our parish!'

'And what's the news here?' he asked, to cut short the unwelcome questions.

'Ah, what indeed. Nothing ill, thanks be to God. All slow and steady, slow and steady all about, like a treadmill, the usual way for our peasant folk.'

'I wanted to come for your wedding, Jaguś, but they wouldn't let me.'

'It was such a party, they danced nigh on three whole days!' shouted Józka.

'Kuba died at that time, by all accounts!'

'Aye, die he did, poor wretch, bled away and passed without holy confession even. They say in the village that he's doing penance, that they've seen him, hanging about the roads at night, moaning at the crossroads or standing at the crosses, waiting on God's mercy! ... Must be Kuba's soul, none other!'

'You don't say!'

'It's true, I've not seen him myself, so I won't swear on it, but maybe, maybe there are such things in the world that human reason, even the greatest, cannot grasp, cannot fathom – God's edicts, not human, no, for we wretches do what we can, and the rest is in God's hands!'

'I am sorry for Kuba. The priest himself was almost in tears when he was telling me about his death.'

'For the fellow were decency itself like none you'll find, and quiet, pious, hard-working, never touched what belonged to another, and ready to share his last capote with a poor man.'

'Things change so in Lipce every time I come, I can't get my head around it. I was at Antek's today, they've a sick child, and poor as church mice, and he himself so changed, so thin, I barely recognized him!'

They said not a word in reply. Jagna turned her face away quickly and began to arrange the bread on the shovel, and the old woman gave such a look that he immediately marked he'd touched on some unpleasantness. He wanted to make amends and wondered what to talk of next, when Józka, her face flaming, stepped up to beg a few coloured wafers.

'I need them for the hanging globes. There were some from the year past, but they were all used up at the wedding.'

He gave her a dozen straight away and in five different colours.

'So many! Dear Jesus, why that's enough for globes and moons and stars!' she cried, overjoyed, then whispered with Jagna. Embarrassed, covering her face with her apron, Józka brought him some six eggs for the gift.

In the meantime, Boryna had returned from town and was coming into the room, Łapa squeezing in at his side, for Witek, too, had appeared at the same time as the master.

'Quick, close the door – the dough will catch cold,' the old woman cried.

'When the women set to, the men need to find lodging, in the inn at least, or every time the baking sinks they'll be to blame,' said Boryna, laughing and warming his stiffened hands. 'The road's like glass and grand for sleighing, but such a frost it's hard to sit in a sleigh for long! Hey, Jaguś, give Pietrek a little bread at least, for he's frozen to the bone in his soldiering greatcoat. Home for long, Jaś?'

'Till Three Kings.'⁴

'It's a good help to your father, what between organ and office! Aye, it's hard for an old man to renounce his quilt in this frost.'

'Not at all, it's just a cow has calved today, so he's stayed home to watch her.'

'Good timing, you'll have milk all winter.'

'Hey, Witek, did you water yon colt?'

'I did it myself,' said Jagna, 'but it wouldn't take even a fingerful. It just capers about and strains for its mother that much I put it in a bigger stall.'

The boys went out, but at the fence Jasio turned to look back at Jagna, for she seemed even lovelier than she'd been in the autumn before the wedding.

No wonder then that she'd conquered the old man completely, that he couldn't see the world for her. They were right in the village, saying he'd altogether lost his head for love, for though he remained as tough and implacable towards others as before, Jagusia could do whatever she liked with him. He obeyed her in all things, saw with her eyes, sought her advice and Dominikowa's, too, so that they had thoroughly overpowered him! It suited him, the farm prospered, all was in order, he had his comforts, someone to complain to and consult, so he thought of nothing, cared for nothing that was not Jagusia, at whom he gazed as at a holy picture!

Even now, here he was, warming himself before the stove, but his besotted eyes followed her everywhere, and he forever mouthed sweet nothings just as before the wedding and only thought what more he could do to flatter her.

But Jagna cared as much for his love as for last year's snow. She was gloomy somehow, impatient with his romancing, and cross. Everything annoyed her, so that she flounced about the room like a February gale – she shunted work on to her mother or Józka, and the old man too she chivvied with peevish words, while as for herself she'd go off to check the oven on the other side of the house, or the colt in the stable, but chiefly to be alone and think about Antek.

Jasio had reminded her of him, so that clear as day he now stood before her, clear as day ...

It was going on three months since she'd seen him, long before the wedding, except for that time passing him on the road under the poplars ... Aye, time flowed by like water: the wedding, then the move, all manner of tribulations, the farm – when had she had the time to think of him! She didn't see him, so he didn't come to mind, and people hesitated too to speak of him in front of her ... And now, no knowing why, suddenly he stood before her eyes and gazed at her so sorrowfully, with such reproach, that her soul fair trembled with vexation ...

'I've not wronged you in nothing, no, so why are you standing in front of me like some repentant soul, why are you haunting me?' she thought miserably, fending off her memories ... but strange how forcefully he came to mind. Why not Mateusz, or Stacho Płoszka, or any of the others? ... No one else but him alone! He must have cast a spell on her, making her so wretched now and crying out inside, and floundering in torment, for such a yearning tore at her, it churned deep within her, and something bore her soul away, so that she longed to take wing and fly as far as the eye could see, to the woods and forest.

What's he doing now, poor wretch, what's he thinking? She had no way to speak with him, no way, it was ... forbidden! True, forbidden, dear Jesus, for it'd be a mortal sin, mortal! So the priest said in confession, he did – if she could only speak to him the once, albeit with witnesses ... but now it would never be, not today, not tomorrow, not ever! She was Boryna's wife, for ever, amen ...

'Jagusia, come on in now, the bread needs taking out!' called the old woman.

She ran to the house, busied herself as best she could, but her thoughts never left him. He kept standing before her, and everywhere she remembered his blue eyes and dark brows, and those sweet red greedy lips! In vain did she furiously tackle her chores: the work flew under her fingers, she tidied the room, and in the evening saw to the cows, which she rarely did. None of it helped – he was always before her and the yearning grew and wrenched her soul, which so vexed her that she sat down on the chest next to Józka, who was speedily making little globes, and burst into tears.

Her mother soothed her, her flustered husband soothed her, they fussed around her as if she were a grizzling child, petted her, gazed into her eyes; but nothing helped. She cried her fill and then suddenly something shifted in her, for she got up from the chest almost merry, chatted and laughed, was even ready to sing had it not been Advent!

Boryna stared in surprise, her mother stared, and then they gave each other a long grave look, took themselves off to the hall, where they whispered away, and returned joyful and merry, all smiles, and were all for taking her in their arms and kissing her and so kind to her that the old woman cried out fiercely:

'Don't go dragging the kneading trough – Maciej'll take it!'

'Like I haven't lugged heavier!'

She understood nothing.

But the old man wouldn't let her; he took it out himself, and then seized an opportunity to corner her in the storeroom, kissed her vigorously and joyfully whispered something so that Józka wouldn't hear.

'You and Mother have lost your heads, it's not true what you're saying, no!'

'Your mother and I know what we're about, I'm telling you, that's how it is. Wait, where are we now? Yuletide ... so not till July, right at harvest ... Not the handiest time, heat, work, but we'll manage, we must thank God anyhow ...' And again he wanted to kiss her, but she tore away angrily and ran off to her mother full of reproaches, but the old woman confirmed it stoutly.

'It's not true, you're imagining things!' Jagna denied hotly.

'It doesn't please you, I see?'

'Why would it – aren't there troubles enough? And here's another nuisance!'

'Don't complain, or the Lord Jesus will punish you.'

'Let him then, let him!'

'Why do you complain so, eh?'

'Because I don't want it, that's all!'

'But if there were a child, if, God forbid, the old man died, his portion would be signed over, equal to the rest, maybe even all of it ...'

'Land, land – that's all you've got on the brain: it's as much as nothing to me ...'

'Because you're young yet, and stupid, and you'll say any old rubbish! To be without land is like a body with no legs that rolls and rolls along and gets nowhere. Just don't be contrary to Maciej, or you'll make him morose ...'

'I'll not keep it pent up – what I do care about Maciej!'

'Spout for the whole world to hear, then, if you've no sense, and let me get on with taking the bread out, or it'll be burnt to a cinder. Better get on with the work, fetch the herring out of the water and into the milk and it'll shed more salt. Józka can grind some poppy seeds, so much yet to do and evening fast approaching ...'

True enough, evening stood at the threshold, the sun was slipping behind the woods and the crimson dusk spilled over the sky in blood-red scrolls so that the snows appeared to blaze, as though scattered with embers. The village grew quieter and hushed; folk were still fetching water from the pond, chopping wood; someone hurried by on a sleigh so fast the horses' spleens squeaked; someone else rushed across the frozen pond; gates creaked here and there, voices rose now and then, but fitfully, and together with the fading sunset and that ashen greyness in which the world was dusted, all movement died away, the farmsteads grew silent and the roads emptied. The distant fields sank into gloom, the winter evening came quickly, overpowering the earth, and the frost set in with a grip so hard the snow sang louder beneath people's clogs as it drew its strange flowers and fretwork on the windowpanes ...

The village vanished into the grey snowy gloom as though it had drained away, so that not a house nor a fence nor an orchard could be seen, only little lights flickering sharply and more numerous than usual, for everywhere they were preparing for the vigil supper.

In every cottage, be it a rich man's or hired hand's or belonging to the very least and poorest, they decked everything out and waited solemnly. Everywhere a sheaf of corn was placed in the eastern corner of the room, the benches or tables were covered with a bleached white linen cloth, hay strewn beneath it, and everyone peered out of the windows for the first star.

It was hazy at first dusk, as is often the way when there's frost, for when the last of the sunset glow was dying, smoky blue mists began to cloud the sky as it dissolved and softened into darkness.

Józka and Witek were frozen through, for they were standing on guard at the porch until they saw the first star.

'It's here, it's here!' yelled Witek suddenly.

Boryna looked out, the others too, and Rocho last of all.

Indeed, there it was, just over in the east, as though the drab shrouds of dusk had been torn open. From the deep blue depths a star was born and seemed to grow before their eyes, flying, spraying light, glowing ever brighter, coming ever closer, so that Rocho knelt down in the snow and the others after him.

'It's the star of the three kings, the star of Bethlehem, in whose light our Lord was born, may his holy name be blessed!'

They repeated the words devoutly and fixed their eyes on that distant brightness, that witness of a miracle, that visible sign of the Lord's mercy on the world.

Their hearts beating with tender gratitude, with burning faith and trust, they received that pure light as though it were sacred fire, overcoming evil, like a sacrament.

And the star grew huge, advancing now like a fiery orb, trailing blue streaks like the spokes of a holy wheel that glittered across the snows, tearing apart the darkness with bright splinters.

Behind it, like faithful servants, other stars leaned out from the heavens, a numberless, unfathomably dense multitude, so that the skies appeared strewn with bright dew, unfurling a deep blue sheet over the world, studded with silver.

'Time for supper, since the Word has become flesh!' declared Roch.

They went inside and were soon seated around the long high bench.

Boryna sat first, and after him Dominikowa and her sons, for they had all come to take supper together. Roch sat in the middle, Pietrek sat next and Witek beside Józka. Jagusia perched only briefly, for there was the food and serving to mind.

A solemn silence filled the room.

Boryna crossed himself and divided the wafer between everyone, and they ate it with reverence, as though it were the Eucharist.

'Christ was born at this hour, so may every creature fortify itself with this holy bread!' said Rocho.

And though they were hungry, as there'd been only dry bread all day, still they ate slowly and with dignity.

First came the sour beetroot soup, cooked with mushrooms and whole potatoes, and then came herring tossed in flour and fried in hemp oil. Next came the dumplings with poppy seeds, followed by cabbage and mushrooms, also dressed with oil, and finally Jagusia served a true delicacy, pancakes with buckwheat flour mixed with honey and fried in poppy seed oil, all with bread as an accompaniment, as it was not fitting to eat cake or strudel that day, since those were made with milk and butter.⁵

They ate for a long time with rarely a word from anyone, the only sound the scrape of spoons against bowls and the smacking of lips – though Boryna rushed to help Jagusia from time to time and relieve her, until the old woman upbraided him.

'Sit down, she'll be fine, her time's a long way off and it's her first Christmas in her new place, so let her get used to it!'

Lapa whined quietly, butting their backs with his head, fawning and wheedling to get a treat more quickly, while the stork, whose place was in the hallway, kept poking the wall or clattering with his beak until the hens answered from their roosts.

They'd not yet finished when a knock came at the window.

'Don't open, don't look, it's something wicked. It'll sidle in and stay the whole year!' cried Dominikowa.

They lowered their spoons and listened in alarm as the knocking was repeated.

'Kuba's spirit!' whispered Józka.

'Don't be silly, it's some needy person. No one should go hungry on this day or be without a roof,' replied Roch, rising and making to open the door.

It was Jagustynka. She stood humbly on the threshold and through the tears that spilled like peas down her face begged quietly:

'Give me a corner and whatever you'd toss to the dogs! Have pity on a poor wretch ... I waited for my children to invite me ... waited ... the cottage were cold ... in vain I froze ... in vain ...

My Jesus ... and now, like some beggar ... when ... my own children ... abandoned me without a morsel of bread ... worse than a dog ... and at theirs it's bustling, full of people ... I went round the corner ... looked in at the windows ... in vain ...'

'Come sit down with us. You should have come first thing in the evening, and not waited for your children's pity ... Knocking the last nails into your coffin is all they'll do willingly, to make sure you'll not be back for anything ...'

And with great kindness Roch made a place for her next to him.

But she couldn't swallow a thing, though Jagusia plied her with every dish and urged her sincerely to eat; it was no use, she could not. She sat quietly, hunched and taut, so that only the trembling of her shoulders revealed how the suffering rent her.

It grew quiet and warm in the chamber, kindly and devout and so festive, as though the holy Infant Jesus were lying there among them.

The enormous fire, constantly fed, crackled merrily in the hearth and lit up the whole room, making the glazed pictures gleam and the frozen panes glow red while they sat along the bench in front of it now, talking quietly and earnestly.

Then Jaguś prepared coffee, which they sweetened liberally and drank slowly ...

At last, Rocho pulled out a book, wound in a rosary, from under his coat and began to read in a quiet voice, deeply moved:

'A new thing hath come to pass. The Virgin hath given birth to a Son: in the lands of Judaea in Bethlehem, not least among cities, the Lord was born in poverty – upon the hay, in a wretched stable, among the cattle, which on this joyful night were his brothers. And that same star which shines today blazed for the Holy Child – and showed the way unto the three kings, who, though heathens and black as cauldrons, had tender hearts and hurried with gifts from distant lands, beyond great mountains, over immense seas to bear witness to the truth.'

He read the tale for a long time and his voice grew stronger and more prayerful, until he began almost to chant, as though he were reciting a holy litany, and everyone sat in pious silence, with hushed attentive hearts, with trembling souls, dazzled by the miracle, full of awe at this mercy granted to folk by the Lord!

'*Hej*, dearest Jesus! A miserable stable was your lot, there in distant lands, among strangers, among wretched Jews, among cruel heretics! And in such want, in such a frost! O holiest poverty, O sweet little child!' they thought and their hearts beat in sympathy. Their souls soared free and flew into the world like birds, right to the land of his birth, to that stable, to the foot of that manger over which the angels sang, falling at the holy feet of the Child, and offering themselves, with their hearts and with the whole force of passionate faith and trust, as the most faithful of servants unto the ages of ages, amen!

Rocho read on, until Józka, who was a sensitive, soft-hearted girl, began to cry dolefully at the Lord's plight. Leaning her face in her hands, Jaguś also cried, until the tears flowed through her fingers. She hid her head behind Jędrzych, who was listening open-mouthed beside her, and was so greatly astonished at what he heard that he tugged Szymek by the capote now and then and cried out, 'Well I never! ... Do you hear, Szymek?' but would quickly stop, reproached by the stern gaze of his mother.

'Poor little 'un didn't have even a cradle!'

'It's a wonder he didn't freeze!'

'That the Lord Jesus were ready to suffer that much!' they marvelled when he'd finished, to which Rocho replied:

'It was only by way of his suffering and sacrifice that he could save the people, and were it not for that, evil would have already completely overcome the world and taken souls for itself.'

'It rules plenty enough as it is,' whispered Jagustynka.

'Sin reigns, so malice rules – evil's cronies they are!'

'Eh ... who knows what rules or what reigns. One thing's for sure, it's an evil fate has humans and suffering in its power.'

'Let be, for fear of sin. Anger at your children blinds you!'

He chided her severely, but Jagustynka made no more objections. Everyone fell silent and sat pondering, except for Szymek, who got up and stealthily made to leave.

'And what's so urgent?' hissed Dominikowa, alert to everything.

'I'm off to the village, it's hot in here,' he mumbled, taking fright.

'Off to have fun at Nastka's, eh?'

'Forbidden, is it – stop us, will you?' he said more sharply, but tossed his hat back on to the chest.

'Get home with Jędrzych – the house has been left to the Almighty. Look in on the cows and wait till I come and then we'll go to church together,' she ordered, but the boys preferred to stay rather than sit in an empty cottage. She did not chide them further, but got up shortly and took a wafer from the table.

'Witek, light the lantern, we'll go to the cows. On this night of the Birth, all the cattle understand human speech, and can speak for themselves, too, seeing as the Lord were born among them. If someone sinless speaks to them, they'll reply with human voices; they're equal to folk today and feel kin to them, so they need to share the wafer too ...'

Everyone set off for the byre, Witek in front with the lantern.

The cows lay side by side, slowly chewing the cud, but at the light and the sound of voices they began to groan and lumber to their feet, turning their great heavy heads.

'You're the woman of the house, Jaguś, it's your place to share it out. They'll thrive better for you, and won't fall sick. Only you mustn't milk them tomorrow, not till evening, or they'll lose their milk,' said Dominikowa.

Jagna broke the wafer into five pieces and, leaning over each cow, she made the sign of the cross between their horns, and pushed a piece into each mouth, on to their wide, rough tongues.

'Don't the horses get some?' asked Józka.

'No, they don't, as they were not there at the time of the Birth.'

They returned to the chamber, and Roch said:

'Every creature, every little blade of grass, even the very least, the tiniest pebble, even that all but invisible star – everything senses, everything knows today that the Lord is born.'

'Dear Jesus! Everything! The earth too, and these stones!' cried Jagna.

'It's true, that's how it is – everything has its own soul. Whatever is in the world feels and awaits its hour, till Jesus in his mercy says: "Rise, O soul, you are worthy of heaven!" Even the meanest worm, and the swaying blade of grass, everything merits and gains God's praise in its own way. And on this night, this one night of the year, everything wakes, gets up, listens closely, waiting for that word! For some it comes; for others it is not yet their turn, so they fly back to the darkness, patiently awaiting the dawn, as a rock, water, earth, a tree or some other thing, but there where the Lord has commanded!'

They fell silent, pondering what Roch had said, for he spoke wisely, straight to the heart, yet to Boryna and Dominikowa it didn't seem quite the whole truth, for though they turned it this way and that in their heads, they could not fathom it. Aye, the power of God was a mystery and the cause of miracles, but that stones and all things should have their own soul ... this they could not comprehend. But they did not ponder it long, for the blacksmith arrived with his wife and children.

'We've come to sit at Father's for a while and go to the Vigil Mass together,' explained the blacksmith.

'Sit down, sit down, it's pleasanter in a crowd, indeed we'll all be together. Only Grzela's missing,' said Boryna.

Józka gave her father a fierce look, for she'd remembered Antek and his family, but was afraid to mention it.

Again they filled the bench by the fire. Only Pietrek stayed outside, chopping wood, so that they wouldn't fall short for the holiday, and Witek fetched armfuls and stacked it in the hallway.

'Ah, I almost forgot! The Voyt caught up with me and asked, Dominikowa, that you go to theirs. His wife is crying and clamouring that she'll not see this night out for sure!'

'I was wanting to go to church with the rest, but since you say she's yelling, then I'll run and look in. I was there in the morning and thought she had a few days yet.'

She had a quiet word with the blacksmith's wife and rushed off to the ailing woman, as she knew about illnesses and had nursed many back to health better than a doctor.

Roch, meanwhile, began to tell all manner of tales fitting for that day, including this story:

'Long ago now, for as many years as have passed since the Holy Birth, a certain man, a wealthy farmer, was strolling back from the fair, where he'd sold a pair of stout calves. He had his thalers well hidden in his bootleg, a fine sturdy staff in his fist, and he was burly too, maybe the strongest man in the village, but he hurried all the same to get home before dark, for robbers hid in the woods in those days and accosted honest folk.

'It must have been summertime, for the wood was green and fragrant and echoed with many sounds, and as a wind was up, the trees swayed and made a great murmur above. The poor fellow hurried along as fast as he could, and looked fearfully about him, but he couldn't see a thing ... nothing but fir beside fir, oak beside oak, pine beside pine, and not a living soul anywhere, but for the birds flitting between the trunks. His terror grew, for he was passing the crucifix, through woodland so dense the eye could barely penetrate it and where robberies most frequently occurred, so he crossed himself, said a prayer out loud and set off at a brisk pace ...

'Now he was happily beyond the tall forest, he had only the scrubby pinewoods and junipers to pass, he could even see the rolling green fields. The plashing of the river reached him now, the larks were singing, he could spy the people at their ploughs and even the storks as they flew in a V above the marshes, and he could smell the blossoming cherry orchards on the wind ... when suddenly from behind the last bushes jumped the bandits! Twelve of them there were, and carrying knives! He defended himself as best he could but they soon overpowered him, and since he did not want to hand over his money willingly but cried out, they knocked him down, pinned him to the ground with their legs, lifted their knives and were just about to stab him ... when suddenly they were as if turned to stone and stood there, knives raised, shoulders hunched, fierce and motionless – and everything stopped dead at that moment ... The birds fell silent and hung in the air ... the rivers stopped flowing ... the sun seemed suspended ... the wind had died ... the trees were leaning as though a gale had bent them ... the wheat too ... the storks appeared fixed to the sky with wings spread ... even the peasant ploughing stood with his whip raised. The whole world took fright in that instant and froze!

'How long it lasted, no one knows – until the sound of angelic voices carried over the earth, singing "God is Born, Great Powers Tremble".⁶

'Everything began to move again, but the bandits, seeing a warning in this miracle, abandoned the man and they too followed the angels' voices to the stable to bow before the Newborn!

Together with all creatures of the earth or of the air.⁷

They all marvelled at Roch's words, but then Boryna, and the blacksmith too, began to tell all kinds of tales.

Finally, Jagustynka, who had sat silent all this time, said wryly:

'You talk and you talk, and it amounts to naught but passing the time! Ha, true it was once that all manner of protectors were sent by heaven and did not let the poor or downtrodden waste away! Why do we not see such today? Is there any less poverty, any less misery, any less of this cruel anguish? ... Humans are abandoned to the world like defenceless birds – happen a hawk, happen some creature, happen hunger or in the end the Reaper himself will finish 'em off. And they tell of mercy and spoonfeed the stupid and delude them with promises that salvation will come! Come it will, but as the Antichrist, and that one will mete out justice and have no more mercy than a hawk on a chick.'

Roch leapt to his feet and cried out in a loud voice:

'Do not blaspheme, woman, do not sin, do not heed the whispers of the Evil One, or you will find yourself bound for condemnation and eternal fire!' He fell heavily on to the bench, trembling all over in holy terror, his voice drowned by tears, in pain over a lost soul. When he had pulled himself together somewhat, he began expounding the truth with all the force of a faithful soul leading the way on to the right path.

A long, long time he talked; the priest at the pulpit could not have done better.

Meanwhile, Witek, greatly struck on learning that cows could talk like folk that night, quietly summoned Józka and both slipped away to the byre.

Holding hands and quaking with fear, crossing themselves constantly, they sneaked inside between the cows.

They knelt down by the biggest one, as though beside the mother of the whole byre. Their breath came short, their souls trembled, tears rose to their eyes, a holy dread pervaded their hearts, as though in church during the Elevation, but sincere trust and faith too, for Witek whispered right into the cow's ear:

'Greyling, Greyling!'

She said not a word in reply, only groaned a little, chewed, working her jaw and smacking her tongue.

'Something's up, since she don't answer – maybe it's a punishment.'

They knelt by another one and again Witek asked, almost tearfully now ...

'Spotty! Spotty!'

Both pressed close to her muzzle, listening with bated breath, but they heard nothing, not a word, nothing ...

'Sinners we are, so we'll not hear 'em. They only talk to the holy, and we're sinful ...'

'True, Józka, true – sinners, we're sinners ... Jesus ... truth ... aye, I pinched the master's halters ... and that old strap ... and that ...' He couldn't say any more, heaving with sobs, sorrow and guilt, and Józka too echoed him from the bottom of her heart, so that they cried together, unable to hug until they'd confessed their faults and all their sins ...

Back in the cottage, no one had marked their absence; they were singing hymns now, since there could be no carols before midnight.

On the other side of the house, meanwhile, Pietrek was washing and scrubbing himself clean and changing completely, as Jagna had brought out his new clothes from the storeroom. They almost shrieked in astonishment when he came into the room; he'd thrown off his greatcoat and soldier's garments, and stood dressed like an ordinary peasant.

'They were laughing at me, calling me a mongrel, so I changed!' he mumbled.

'Change your speech not your rags!' Jagustynka threw in.

'It'll come back itself, it will, for it's clear he's not lost his soul completely.'

'Five years he's been away, not heard his own tongue, so it's no surprise!'

They fell silent suddenly as the sharp shrill sound of the small church bell broke into the room.

'It's the sign for the vigil – time to get going!'

They were all out in the space of a prayer – all but Jagustynka, who stayed behind to watch the house, but mainly to give vent to her afflicted heart.

It was a frosty night, turning blue and sparkling with stars.

The bell kept ringing, twittering like a little bird, summoning them to church.

Folk had begun to leave their houses. Here and there a stream of light would pour through an open doorway, like a flash of lightning. Elsewhere, lights went out at windows, a voice would sound through the darkness, a cough, the crunch of snow underfoot, some holy words of greeting. More and more figures loomed in the blue-grey night, whole throngs, so that only the tramping of feet echoed on the dry air.

Anyone with a breath in their body headed for church. Only the very old, the ill or crippled stayed behind.

The blazing church windows and the light pouring through the main doors, thrown wide open, could be seen from far afield. Folk streamed in, like water, slowly filling the interior, which was all decked in fir and spruce trees, as though a thick forest had sprung up inside the church. It nestled against the white walls, tumbled over the altars, rose up from the pews and almost touched the vaults with its tips, swaying and rocking under the onslaught of this living wave of people. The glowing lights of the altar could barely be seen twinkling through a foggy cloak of steaming breath.

And still folk kept on coming, in an endless stream ...

A whole multitude had arrived from as far away as Polne Rudki, arm in arm, smartly dressed and sturdy, for they were huge peasants, broad, clad in navy capotes, blond-headed every one, as though their hair were spun flax, and each one of their women a beauty, in a double woollen apron, her bonnet wound in a red shawl.

In drabs and drabs, two or three at a time, they came from Modlica too, runs and weaklings without exception, in patched grey capotes, carrying staffs, for they'd come on foot. At the inns it was mockingly said of them that they lived on eels alone, for they'd settled on low fields, among the mud, and the scent of peat smoke wafted from them.

And folk came from Wola, in whole clans, like juniper bushes that always grow clumped together. Stunted, of never more than middle height and squat as a full sack, but spry and loud, they were stubborn litigators, eager brawlers, and downright pests in the forest, their grey capotes trimmed with black cord and bound with a red belt.

The gentry, so-called,⁸ from Rzepki appeared too, who, as gossip had it, owned no more than 'a sack and a bundle' with five to a cow's tail and one cap between three. They came in a pack, silent, glowering, and their women – all tricked up as to the manner born with the loveliest white faces and given to twittering – walked in the midst of them and were shown much respect.

Right after them piled in folk from Przyłęk, like a pine forest sprung tall, slender and strong, dazzling the eyes with their dress: their capotes were white, their waistcoats red, their shirt ribbons green and their trousers striped yellow. They pushed down the middle of the church resolutely, heeding no one, right to the altar.

Behind them, almost the last, came the Debica peasants, like some kind of squires. They were few in number, each walking in separately, with pomp. Preening and strutting, they sat themselves in the pews right before the great altar, taking precedence over others, sure in their wealth. Their women came carrying prayer books, wearing white bonnets tied under the chin and *katanas*⁹ of

thin cloth ... Then came still others from the most distant villages, from every hamlet, from houses scattered throughout the woods, from sawing huts,¹⁰ from manors, so that who could remember and list them all!

Among that dense throng that swayed and murmured like a forest shone the white capotes of the folk from Lipce and the red kerchiefs of their women.

The church was full to the brim, to the very last place in the porch, so that those who had come last had to say their prayers outside the door in the cold.

The priest came out for the first Mass,¹¹ the organ struck up and folk lurched forwards, bent and fell to their knees before the majesty of the Lord.

It was quiet now, no one sang and everyone prayed, gazing at the priest and at the candle burning high before the altar. The organ hummed softly, playing such plaintive tunes that a cold shiver ran through people's bones. Sometimes the priest would turn round, spread his hands and say some holy Latin words aloud, at which folk stretched out their arms, sighed deeply, then bowed in devout contrition, beating their breasts and praying fervently.

Then, when the Mass was over, the priest climbed the pulpit and declaimed at length, preaching on this holy day. He warned against evil, scolded, waved his arms and thundered with burning words, so that some sighed heavily, some beat their breasts, some in their consciences confessed their sins, others meditated, the softer-hearted wept, the women in particular – for the priest spoke earnestly and so wisely that his words struck at each heart and mind, or of those who were listening, for several had dozed off on account of the heat.

Then at last, before the second Mass, when folk were somewhat shattered with all that praying, the organ resounded again and the priest sang out:

'Who will to the manger run ...'

The crowd swayed, got up from its knees, took up the tune immediately and, breasts filled with joy, roared with one powerful voice:

'To carol to the little one!'

The trees shook and the lights flickered in that fervent gale of voices.

So united were they now in soul and faith and voice, it was as though one mighty song were springing from every heart, right to the holy Infant's tiny feet.

When they'd heard the second Mass, the organist began to play carols with such verve it was hard to keep still. They twitched and tapped their feet, turned to the choir and merrily bellowed out the carols, following the organ.

Only Antek did not sing along with the rest. He'd come with his wife and Stach's family, but let them go ahead while he stayed in the pews at the back. Not wishing to take his former place among the farmers before the altar, he was looking about for somewhere to sit when he spotted his father and his entire household, making their way down the middle of the church, with Jagna at their head.

He slipped under a spruce and from then on did not take his eyes from her, for she was visible in the distance through the greenery, sitting at the edge of the pew by the aisle. Without thinking or even being aware of it, he pressed stubbornly through the crowd until he was beside her, and when they knelt down during Mass, he knelt too and leaned over so far that his head was touching her knees.

She did not notice him at first, because the taper by which she was reading from her prayer book cast too faint a light and the veiling branches of the spruce meant she couldn't make out anything to her side, but during the Elevation, when she knelt down and beat her breast and bowed her head, she happened to glance sideways. Her heart stood still, she froze with joy and did not dare move, did not dare glance again, for this vision seemed to her a dream, an illusion, nothing more ... She shut her eyes tight and knelt, leaning over for a long, long time, bent to the ground, almost dizzy with emotion ... until she sat up suddenly and looked straight into his face.

Yes, it was him all right, Antek, it was him. So haggard, darkened, grown so wretched that even in this gloom it was easy to see, and those great, truculent proud eyes of his looked so sweetly, and were so full of sorrow, that her soul contracted with dismay and compassion and the tears came to her eyes.

She sat stiffly like the other women, looking at her prayer book, but she could not make out a single letter, not a page, nothing, for those sad eyes, sorrowful eyes, blazing flashing eyes, stood before her, shining like stars. They blotted out the whole world, so that she completely lost her head, was utterly helpless – and still he knelt there, she could hear his short hot breathing and feel that sweet power, that terrible power that radiated from him, that went straight to her heart, seemed to bind her like a rope and fill her with such a sweetness, fear and trembling that made her lose her mind, a cry of love so powerful that every bone in her body quaked, and her heart thudded like a bird whose wings have been nailed to a wall by children for the fun of it!

Mass had been said, the sermon was over, the second Mass was done, folk were singing together, praying, sighing, weeping – while the two of them remained as though beyond it all, hearing nothing, seeing nothing, aware of nothing but each other.

Fear, joy, love, memories, promises, enchantment and desire burned within them by turn, leapt from heart to heart, bound them together, so that they felt as one, their hearts beat as one, their eyes flashed with the same fire.

Antek moved even closer, leaned his shoulder against her hip, until she almost swooned and flushed red, and when she next knelt down, he whispered with lips hot as coals right into her ear:

'Jaguś! Jaguś!'

She shuddered, nearly fainting with emotion at that voice which pierced her with joy and delight, like the sweetest of blades.

'Come out beyond the rick some day ... I'll be waiting every evening ... don't be afraid ... I must speak to you ... come ...' he whispered passionately and close, so close that his breath scalded her face ...

She didn't answer. Her strength failed her, her voice caught in her throat, her heart fluttered and beat so hard she thought everyone around her must hear it – but she began to rise as though ready to leave now ... to go where he'd said ... where love demanded ... beyond the rick ...

Just then the first carol thundered and the place shook with singing. She came to her senses a little and sat there, looking around at the people and the church ...

But Antek was gone; he'd retreated imperceptibly and slowly backed out right into the graveyard.

He stood for a long time in the frost under the bell tower, in the bracing air, breathing in, coming to ... but such a joy swelled his heart, such a cry inside, such a powerful whirlwind, that he did not hear the singing, pounding through the church doors and into the open, or the soft echoing voices of the bells, ringing in the tower ... No, he was aware of nothing. Grabbing a fistful of snow and swallowing it greedily, he leapt over the wall into the road – and raced like a gale across the fields.

CHAPTER 5

It was dawn by the time the Boryna family returned from church and barely a prayer later the whole house resounded with snoring. Only Jagusia, though utterly exhausted, did not fall asleep; in vain did she cling to the pillow, in vain did she shut her eyes or even cover her head with the quilt – it did not help, sleep would not come. Worse, some phantom seemed to have slumped upon her breast, pressing down with such force that she could neither breathe, nor cry out, nor leap from the bed. She lay motionless, in a stupor of half sleeping, half waking, in which the mind discerns nothing and the soul alone spins itself into memories as though from a distaff and entangles the whole world in them, surveying all kinds of wonders, floating over many lands, clothing itself in the sun, while remaining itself no more than a reflection upon pure but agitated waters ... So it was with Jagna, who didn't sleep, but from whose mind everything had vanished. Her soul floated like a bird over wondrous things – over days now past, times long dead and living only in remembrance ... She felt as though she were in church ... Antek knelt beside her ... He kept talking and searing her with his eyes, with his words, possessing her with both sweet torments and fear ... Or the sound of singing and the organ booming so intensely that she felt each single note inside ... Or the priest's severe red face appearing as he stretched his arms over the people ... Or lights ... Then other, older memories came ... meetings ... kisses ... embraces ... until she was awash with heat and delight and pressed hard and taut into the pillows ... Or again she'd hear loud and clear, 'Come! Come!' until she made to rise and seemed to be on her way, on her way ... creeping under the trees, into the gloom ... trembling with fear, some cry pursuing her, a gust of terror from the darkness.

And so it went on repeatedly, first one thing, then another, then yet another assailed her, so that she could neither rouse herself nor break free. It had to be a phantom smothering her or the Evil One soliciting her and beguiling her to sin.

It was broad daylight when she rose from the bed, looking like she'd come down from the cross. All her bones ached, she was pale, shaken and terribly sad.

The frost had eased a little, but the world had darkened. There was a brief flurry of snow, then a strong wind blew again and snatched at the trees, until they stood in a snowy storm, and whistled along the roads. Despite this the village buzzed with festive gladness, the lanes were full of people, a sleigh would tear by and clusters of folk stood chatting at the fences or visited neighbours, while hordes of children gambolled by the pond like foals on the pasture, their shouts echoing throughout the village.

But Jagusia was neither merry nor blithe at heart, oh no! ... Racked with cold though the fire crackled cheerfully in the hearth, she felt numb somehow, despite the constant hubbub and Józka's singing that rang throughout the house. She felt a stranger among her own, such a stranger that she looked at them with alarm as though she'd found herself among bandits.

Unable to resist, she listened time and again to those heated whispers of Antek's, which rang constantly and no less insistently in her heart ...

'The wrath of God and eternal damnation upon such!' She clearly heard the voice of the priest and saw his red face and his threatening hands as they reached out towards her.

In a rush of fear, she blanched with a deep sense of guilt. 'No, no, I won't go out! It would be a mortal sin, mortal!' she repeated, fortifying herself with that word and renouncing evil. But her soul cried out in sorrow and torment, because she longed for him, longed with all her might, with all the force of life, as a tree heaped with snow longs for the sun in springtime, as the earth tenses at the first breath of warmth ...

But the fear of sin still prevailed, so that she struggled and endeavoured to forget him, forget him for ever ... She did not leave the cottage, she was afraid to venture to the farmyard, in case he was waiting, hidden there, and would call her ... And would she resist then, curb her soul? Wouldn't she fly towards that voice?!

She threw herself into her work, but there was so little to do. Józka had already taken charge of everything, and the old man was always at her heels, not letting her touch a thing.

'Rest, don't rush about, so that naught befalls you before your time.'

So she did nothing, knocked about the rooms aimlessly, looked outside for no reason, stood on the porch, and ever greater boredom and irritation took hold of her in equal measure, for those watchful husbandly eyes vexed her, the joy and bustle of the whole house vexed her, even the stork wandering about the room vexed her so that she deliberately jostled him with her woollen skirt, until, unable to stand it any longer and seizing an opportune moment, she ran to her mother's, but by way of the pond, taking the short cut, and still she looked about in alarm, in case someone should be lying in wait behind a tree!

Her mother wasn't about; she'd looked in on the Voyt's wife that morning and had returned there now. Jędrzych, meanwhile, was smoking by the hearth, and every so often would rush out to check the road while Szymek dressed in the storeroom.

Jagna felt quite changed. All her troubles fell away as soon she felt her old self in her own house, among the old familiar things. She cheered up at once and began to bustle about unawares, looked in on the cows, strained the milk that had been standing in pails since morning, threw the chickens some grain, swept the chamber, tidied up, did whatever was needed. She chatted gaily with the boys, for Szymek, all decked out in a new capote, had come out into the chamber and was combing his hair in front of the mirror.

'Where are you off to, all dressed up?'

'Off to the village – the boys are getting together at the Ploszkas.'

'Mother's letting you, is she?'

'I'm not going to keep asking permission. I've my own mind and my own will, and if I want to do something, I'll do it!'

'He will too, he will!' Jędrzych added, nervously glancing out at the road.

'You bet I will, on purpose I will. I'm off to the Ploszkas, I'm off to the inn, and I'm off to drink with the boys!' he yelled boldly.

'Grant a fool his will, he'll dash off into the whole wide world like a calf, though he need only go as far as the teat!' she said quietly, not contradicting him in anything, though he railed against his mother and ranted fiercely. She heard hardly any of it, for it was time to go back home, go back. It was so sad to leave that she got up almost in tears and went, slowly and heavily. Back at the house, it was more riotous and merry than ever. Nastka Gołębianka had rushed over and they were carrying on so, you could hear them from the road.

'Look here, my wand has flowered!' Józka cried to Jagna as she came in.

'What wand?'

'The one I cut at St Andrew's. I planted it in sand, kept it on the stove and it blossomed!'¹ There were not a single flower when I looked yesterday, and during the night it blossomed completely – look!'

She carefully brought out a pan filled with sand in which a sizeable cherry branch was fixed, scattered with delicate flowers.

'Wild cherry and sweet pink flowers!' whispered Witek gravely.

'Ah true, a wild cherry!'

They gathered round and were gazing with a strange joy and wonder at the fragrant flowering branch when in came Jagustynka, sure of herself again today, shrill and insolent and on the lookout for someone to needle thoroughly.

'A wand's blossomed, true – not for you though, Józia. It's the strap you could do with, or something harder!' she said, as soon as she stepped in.

'It is for me it's blossomed, I cut it myself on St Andrew's night, I did ...'

'You're still young, so it must be Nastka's wedding it's foretelling!' Jagna explained.

'We planted it in the pot together, but I was the one that cut it, so it's blossomed for me!' she yelled, ready to cry because they wouldn't confirm it.

'You've time aplenty to chase the lads and stand about the stiles. It's the older ones' turn, the older ones!' Jagustynka said, looking at no one, but smiling towards Nastka. 'Quiet now, Józia. You know that last night the organist's Magda gave birth in the church porch.'

'You're fibbing!'

'If only, but it's true as true! Ambrozy was off to ring the bells and found her ...'

'Jesus! And she didn't freeze!'

'She didn't, nay, but the child froze to death! And Magda's barely gasping. They took her to the presbytery and are still reviving her ... would be better if they didn't ... what's there to live for, what good's awaiting her: only suffering and toil!'

'Mateusz says that after she were thrown out of the organist's, she were forever coming to the mill and hanging about, but then Franek walloped her and chased her away, on the miller's orders 'parently.'

'What was he meant to do: frame her and hang her on the wall? He's a man like any other, swore blind while on the hunt, and stopped when he'd bagged his quarry! Aye, he's not without guilt, but the guiltiest are the organist's lot! While she were healthy, they drove her like two oxen, she did everything by herself, and is that a small farm? Five cows alone, and that many barns, pigs, livestock, that many fields! And when she got sick, they threw her out – scum they are, not people!'

'Why did she hang around with Franek, then?' shrieked Nastka.

'You'd do the same, even with Jasiek, if you believed he'd be having the banns read!'

Nastka took umbrage at this and began to hold forth, but Boryna entered so they both fell silent.

'You've heard about Magda! She's alive, they managed to bring her back from the brink. Ambrozy says but one more prayer and she'd have kicked the bucket. Rocho's still rubbing her with snow and getting her to drink, but apparently she'll be ailing some time,' he said.

'And where'll she go, poor thing?' said Jagustynka.

'Koziols'll have to take her in, she's kin after all!'

'The Koziols! When they themselves are living on whatever they can scrape, fiddle or pilfer. How'll they afford to nurse her? That many farmers in the village, that many rich folk, and no one's hurrying to help!'

'Aye, farmers have bottomless wells. Everything falls straight out of the sky for them; all they need do is hand it out on every side! Everyone's got cares enough of their own, never mind strangers! Yes, I'm to pick up everyone at the roadside that needs it, am I, take 'em off home, feed 'em, nurse 'em and happen pay the doctors! You're old, and the wind's blowing through your head.'

'True, no one is bound to help another, but a man's not a beast, to be left to die under a fence.'

'That's the way the world is and ever has been ordered – will you change it?'

'I recall how earlier, before the war,² during gentry times, there were a hospital for the poor in the village, in the house where the organist is now, I well recall, that folk paid for by the morgen.³

But Boryna had grown impatient and would say nothing more.

'Talk'll do no more than will incense for the dead!' he ended darkly.

'Of course it won't, of course. For those that lack a compassionate heart for human travails, weeping is useless! For those for whom all is well, the whole world seems as it should be, just as God has ordered!'

But Boryna did not answer, so Jagustynka turned to Nastka:

'How are Mateusz's ribs, better?'

'Mateusz? What's happened to him?'

'Don't you know?' cried Nastka. 'It was before Christmas, on Tuesday, I think. Your Antek thrashed him; took him by the collar, carried him out the mill and dashed him against the fence so hard that four of his ribs snapped. He fell in the water and nearly drowned. He's ill now, spitting blood, cannot move. Ambrozy's saying that his innards are twisted and four cracked ribs! And how he moans and groans constantly!' She burst into tears.

Jagna had leapt up at the very first words, as though someone had stabbed her right in the heart, for it instantly struck her that it was surely over her, but she quickly sat back down on the chest and began pressing her quivering eyelids to the cherry blossom to cool them ...

Everyone in the house was stunned, as they knew nothing of it, for though talk had been rife in the village from the outset, it had not reached the Borynas.

'Like unto like, one ruffian found another. They'll not do each other overmuch harm!' muttered the old man, but he must have been annoyed, for he frowned and began throwing wood on to the fire.

'What were they fighting over?' Jagna asked later.

'You!' snapped the old woman bitterly.

'Oh aye, but really.'

'Like I said! Mateusz was boasting at the mill to his friends that he'd been with you in the storeroom many a time. Antek heard and beat him! Like dogs over a bitch, that's how they bare their teeth over you.'

'Don't make fun, when it's hard for me to listen.'

'Ask in the village if you don't believe me, everyone'll tell you the same. I'm not saying that Mateusz was speaking the truth, just what he told people ...'

'That foul liar!'

'There's nowt to defend you from gossiping tongues! They'll not let up even beyond the grave.'

'It's good Antek thrashed him, good! I'd like to add my share!' she hissed fiercely.

'Hark at her, how the chicken's claws turn to a hawk's.'

'For a lie, I'd kill him straight off! Gypsy scum!'

'So I tell everyone, except they don't believe it – they're getting stuck in.'

'They'll shut up when Antek trims their tongues!'

'Ha, he'll declare war on the whole world for you, will he?' she smirked.

'And you, like a proper Judas, add your portion and take pleasure in other folk's misery.'

Jagna was thoroughly angry now, maybe for the first time in her life to such a degree, so angry at Mateusz that she was ready to fly and tear at him with just those claws! She would not have borne that anger had it not been for her memories of Antek and his goodness! A great tenderness flooded through her, an unspoken gratitude blazed in her heart that he had defended her and not let her be wronged, but in spite of that she flounced about the house, shouted at Józka and Witek for the slightest reason, until the old man was troubled and sat beside her and stroked her face, asking:

'What is it, Jaguś, what?'

'Nothing. Get off, cosying up in front of folk!'

She pushed him away brusquely.

'Ha, the oaf's after stroking and hugging me, the old beggar!' she thought angrily. For the first time she remarked how old he was, for the first time a sense of disgust was aroused in her towards him, and a deep aversion, almost hatred. She observed him now, with hidden but gleeful disdain. He had aged significantly of late, shuffled his feet, was hunched over and his hands trembled.

'The old goat, the dullard!'

She shuddered with disgust and thought all the more insistently of Antek, no longer struggling against the memories, nor fleeing those sweet tempting whispers!

The day dragged on, unbearably. Every minute she'd be out on the porch or into the orchard behind the house to gaze at the fields through the trees ... or she'd lean against the brushwood fence that separated the orchard from the track running behind the village alongside the orchards and outbuildings. With yearning eyes she'd look out at the world, into the white snowy fields, to the darkening woods, though she couldn't make out a thing. Such a deep joy possessed her, that he'd taken her part and not let her be insulted!

'He's the sort who can do anything! A proper strongman he is!' she thought with tenderness. If he were to appear now, this very second! She'd not resist him, no!

The hayrick stood just a short way off, beyond the track, set within the field a little. The sparrows twittered underneath and took shelter in their hordes in a great hole made in the hay; the farmhand couldn't be bothered to climb up and toss the hay down from the top, despite Boryna's orders, so he picked at it bit by bit, in clumps, until he'd plucked out a cave into which a couple of people could squeeze.

'Come out behind the hayrick! Come!' she unwittingly repeated Antek's plea.

She ran to the cottage, for the bells had begun to ring for vespers, and she had an urge to go to church, in the numb, vague hope that she would meet him there.

But nay, no sign of him at church. Instead, right by the entrance to the porch, she met Hanka. She greeted her, holding back her hand from the stoop so that the other could dip her fingers first. But Hanka did not return the greeting and did not reach for the holy water; she passed her by, throwing her a look like a stone.

The tears sprang to Jagna's eyes at this snub and show of visible anger, but she sat in the pew and could not tear her eyes from the other's pale drawn face.

'Antek's wife, and so scrawny, such a runt, well, well!' the thought ran through her head. She quickly forgot her, however, as the choir was singing and the organ played so beautifully, so quietly and solemnly, that she was completely immersed in the music. Never had it felt so good and sweet in church, never ever; she did not even pray. Her prayer book lay open, her rosary rested idle between her fingers, and she just sighed, her eyes wandering over the darkness that drifted slowly through the windows, over the paintings and glittering lights, and glided over the barely discernible colours as her soul floated in the world beyond, among these marvellous heavenly images, muffled, hushed sounds, prayerful singing, holy peaceful ecstasy. She drank of such forgetfulness that she no longer marked where she was or anything but these saints, who seemed to her to step down from the pictures and approach her with the sweetest of smiles, their hands stretching over her in blessing and over all the folk, who were bowing like flax, while above them fluttered blue robes, red robes, merciful gazes, inexpressible music, hymns of thanksgiving – so that it was all too much for words!

She came round just as evensong was ending and the organ stopped. The silence woke her from her peaceful daydreams, and she got up regretfully and followed the others out. In front of the church she again met Hanka, who stood directly in front of her, as though wanting to say something, but gave her a hateful look and went off.

'She glares and thinks she'll scare me, the idiot,' thought Jagna, returning home.

Evening had fallen now, a quiet evening, a little languid and solemn. It was dark out there, the starry brightness had grown faint in the turbid sky, so that a ray of light broke through only here and there, while a powdery snow fell slowly, noiselessly, flickering past the windowpanes and drifting in an endless trail of soft yarn.

It was quiet in the chamber too and somewhat sleepy. Szymek came early in the evening, seemingly to visit, but mainly to meet Nastka. They sat side by side, talking quietly.

Boryna was not back yet, Jagustynka sat by the stove, peeling potatoes; on the other side of the house, Pietrek played quietly on his fiddle, but so mournfully that Łapa kept whining and giving drawn-out howls. Witek was there too with Józka, until Jagna, unnerved by the playing, shouted through the door:

'Stop it, Pietrek! That music's fit to make you cry!'

'It'd get me to sleep better than anything,' Jagustynka said with a laugh.

But the fiddle ceased, to be heard again a little later, as a faint, barely audible tune from behind the stable, where Pietrek had removed himself and played long into the night. The supper was just being made when the old man returned.

'Voyt's wife has given birth, there's quite the fuss over there. Dominikowa's seeing people off, so many turned up. You should look in tomorrow, Jaguś.'

'Oh right away, I'll go right now,' she cried gladly, all afire.

'Why not – I'll come with you.'

'Eh ... well, maybe tomorrow ... since you say there are that many people, I'd rather in daylight – it's snowing, pitch-black.' She made excuses, suddenly discouraged. He agreed to that too and did not insist, especially as at that moment the blacksmith's wife entered with the children.

'Where's your husband?' said Boryna.

'A threshing machine broke down in Wola, so they called for him – the manor's smith can't manage ...'

'He seems to be at the manor a lot these days!' Jagustynka threw in pointedly.

'Does that bother you?'

'Why ever would it. I'm just saying, marking, waiting to see what comes of it ...'

But there it ended, for no one wanted to make loud conversation for all the room to hear. They chatted quietly and lazily instead, with everyone more than a little dozy after yesterday's exertions, so that even at supper they ate without gusto, casting glances at Jagusia, who bustled about feverishly, urging them to eat, though they'd put their spoons down already, then burst into sudden laughter for no reason, or again would join the girls, chat nineteen to the dozen, then stop of a sudden and rush to the other side of the house, only to turn back at the hallway again. She was in a torment of feverishness, full of misgivings and anxieties. The evening trailed on, slow, heavy, somnolent, while the urge in her grew and relentlessly intensified to run outside ... to the hayrick ... But she couldn't decide, was afraid they'd notice ... feared the sin ... restrained herself with all her might and trembled in torment, her soul whimpering inside like a dog on a chain, her heart straining ... No, she couldn't, she couldn't ... but maybe he was there already ... waiting ... watching ... wandering near the cottage ... maybe lurking in the orchard peering at the windows, looking at her right now ... and pleading ... shaking with grief that she hadn't come out ... She would go, yes, she couldn't stand it any longer ... just for a minute, just one word, just to say: 'Go, I'm not coming, it's a sin ...' She was looking round for her apron already, on her way towards the door ... on her way ... but something seemed to grab hold of her and stop her in her tracks ... she was afraid ... and Jagustynka's eyes were following her every step, like watchful hounds. Nastka too was giving her strange looks ... and the old man ... Did they know something? ... Had they noticed? ... No, I won't go today, no ...

Jagna took hold of herself finally, but felt so worn out that she barely knew what was going on around her. She came to at last when Łapa started to bark in front of the house. It was almost empty in the room, only Jagustynka was dozing by the fire. The old man looked out of the window as the barking grew more fierce.

'Likely Antek couldn't wait and ...' She leapt up in alarm.

But it was only old Kłab standing in the doorway and behind him, shaking themselves down and stamping the snow from their feet on the threshold, slowly came Winciorek, lame Grzela, Michał Caban, Franek Bylica – the brother of Hanka's father – Walenty with the crooked jaw and Józek Wachnik ...

Boryna looked in surprise at this procession, but he didn't breathe a word, just returned their greetings, shook hands, invited them to sit, pulled out benches and offered tobacco ...

They sat in a row, helping themselves willingly – one sneezed, another wiped his nose and the next his eyes, for it was powerful stuff. One fellow looked about the room while another threw in some comment to which a second replied judiciously and with deliberation; one fellow commented on the snows, another set forth his tribulations, yet another sighed and nodded in assent – and all discoursed together sagely, gradually approaching the business that had brought them ...

Boryna fidgeted on the bench and glanced into their eyes, attempting to draw them out and to advance from different angles.

But they would not let themselves be led. They sat in a row, hoary-haired to a man, wizened, clean-shaven, peers in age, still robust, though the years and toil had bent them towards the ground like mossy boulders in a field; stern, tough, curt wiseacres, who guarded against speaking before due time and circled around the baulks of the business, like canny sheepdogs herding sheep through a gate.

Until finally Kłab cleared his throat, spat and declared solemnly:

'Why dally and carp; we've come to find out – are you with us?'

'We cannot decide without you ...'

'Since you're first in the village.'

'And the Lord has not begrudged you good sense.'

'And though without office, still you stand at the head of the community ...'

'Everybody looks to you.'

'And it's a matter of an injury to all.'

Everyone said his piece, so flatteringly that Boryna reddened, spread his hands and declared:

'People, I do not see yet what matter you're bringing?'

'Why, it's our wood that they're planning to chop down after Epiphany!'

'They're already sawing some wood or other at the mill.'

'That's Jewish wood from Rudki, did you not know?'

'I didn't, I don't have time to go about questioning folk ...'

'And you were first to rail against the squire ...'

'I were thinking he'd sold our clearing ...'

'Whose has he sold then, whose?' cried Caban.

'Why, the wood he bought.'

'He's sold it, but more too at Wolf's Hollow and he's aiming to chop it down ...'

'He'll be chopping nothing down without our consent.'

'Aye, they've already marked the wood, measured the forest and after Three Kings they'll start felling.'

'Well, if that's so, a complaint must be made to the commissioner,' said Boryna after a pause.

'From sowing to harvest not all will survive!' muttered Caban.

'A doctor's no use to a man on his deathbed!' added Walenty with the crooked jaw.

'As to a complaint, by the time the magistrates meet and ban it, there'll not be a stump left in our wood. D'you not mark how it was at Dębica?'

'The manor's like a wolf: let it taste a single sheep, and it'll be off with the whole flock.'

'We can't let them start getting away with it!' said Boryna.

'You spoke a true word, Maciej. Tomorrow the farmers are meeting after church at mine, so that the community can decide, so we've come to invite you to our council,' said Kłab.

'They're all coming?'

'All, right after church ...'

'Tomorrow ... Well, I needs must go to Wola, in truth. Kin are parcelling up a farm, scrapping and contesting, and I promised to adjudicate, make sure no poor wretch is ill done by, so I must go, but I'll stand by whatever you decide, as though I'd agreed it with you.'

They departed somewhat morose, for though he'd confirmed all and agreed to everything they said, they were well aware that he was not sincerely siding with them.

'Ha, confer away, but without me!' he thought. 'Neither the Voyt nor miller nor the first farmers in the village will take your side! Let the manor hear that I'm making no demands and they'll pay up quicker for the cow ... and will want to settle separately ... The fools! ... Let the squire chop to the last fir ... and then make your brouhaha, and go to court, get your detentions, give him the squeeze – that'll get more out of him than by agreement. Let them hold their council, I'll bide my time, I'm in no hurry, no indeed!'

The whole house had gone to bed, and Maciej sat, writing and reckoning with chalk on the bench, deliberating late into the night.

The next day right after breakfast he ordered the farmhand to harness the sleigh.

'Like I said yesterday, I'm off to Wola. Mind the house, Jaguś, and if anyone asks, make it known that I've had to go, and you look in on the Voyt's wife.'

'Will you be back late?' she asked with hidden joy in her heart.

'Towards evening, maybe later.'

He put on his clothes, which she'd brought out from the storeroom. She tied the shirt ribbons at his neck, helped in everything. Feverish with impatience, she urged Pietrek to harness the horse more quickly. She was shaking all over, could hardly keep still, joy was crying out inside her, joy that he would be gone the whole day, return late, perhaps not until nightfall, and that she would be alone at dusk – at dusk she'd go out to the hayrick ... She would! *Hej!* Her soul was straining, ready to soar, her eyes danced, she reached out her hands, held her breath and the flames ran through her like bolts of lightning, flooding her with sweet torment ... But suddenly, unexpectedly, a strange dread seized her and squeezed at her heart, so that she fell silent, the excitement subsided and she watched, dazed, as Boryna fastened his belt, pulled down his hat and gave some order to Witek.

'Take me with you!' she whispered quietly.

'Ha! Who'd be left in the house?' He was greatly surprised.

'Take me! It's St Stephen's today, so there's little work, take me! It's so dull, take me!' She begged so earnestly that though he was mightily surprised, he did not resist and acquiesced.

She was ready in a moment and they left immediately. The sleigh at the front door sprang forwards and swept away.

CHAPTER 6

'And there was I thinking you were stuck in the snow somewhere,' he murmured with irony.

'Hardly! Try hurrying in such a blizzard. I had to feel my way, it's chucking down snow that hard you can scarce open your eyes, and such snowdrifts on the roads, such mayhem, you cannot make out a thing two steps off.'

'Is your mother in?'

'Aye, where'd she be going in such foul weather? She were at the Koziols' come morning, but it's a poor do with Magda, that one's heading for the priest's byre, so she weren't much help,' replied Jagna, brushing off the snow.

'What's the news in the village?' he jibed.

'Go ask, then you'll know. I wasn't chasing after gossip!'

'The squire rode through – did you not know?'

'Blizzard's bad enough for a dog to bear, it's a wonder the squire would bother ...'

'If needs must, then a blizzard's naught ...'

'For sure, if needs must ...' she said, laughing doubtfully.

'He promised he would himself. No one asked him,' Boryna said sharply. He put aside his drawknife, got up from the shaving horse and went to the window to look out, but there was such a snowstorm surging outside that neither fences nor trees could be seen.

'It seems the snow's no longer falling,' he said more mildly.

'Ah no, it's whirling, tugging, sweeping and puffing and tossing that much, you can't make out the road,' said Jagna. She warmed her hands and set about reeling thread from the spindle on to the spool. The old man went back to his work, meanwhile, but kept glancing at the window with growing impatience and listening.

'Where's Józka?' he asked a moment later.

'At Nastka's probably, she's always over there.'

'Loafer of a lass, can't sit at home for the length of a prayer.'

'She's bored, she says.'

'Ha, looking for fun.'

'It's what she says. Anything to get out o' working.'

'Can you not order her?'

'As if. I said something once or twice, she snapped at me like I were the dog. If you don't rein her in, she puts my orders you know where.'

But the old man paid no heed to these complaints; he was listening with even greater impatience, though no human voice came from without. The gale howled, buffeting outside, beating its broad shoulders against the walls until the house shuddered and groaned.

'Are you going, then?' she asked quietly.

He did not answer, for he'd heard the door to the hallway open and at that moment Witek burst in, breathless, and shouted from the threshold:

'Squire's gone by already!'

'Since when? Close the door quick.'

'You can still hear the sleighbells!'

'Alone?'

'There's such a snowstorm I could only make out the horses.'

'Run right now and find out where he stopped!'

'Will you go to him?' she asked quietly, in a stifled voice.

'I'll wait till they call for me, I'll not butt in, but it's not like they'll agree anything without me ...'

They both fell silent. Jagna kept winding, measuring the thread and tying it in strands, and the old man, since impatience was making him fumble, threw everything down and began to ready himself to go out, but before he'd finished, Witek rushed in.

'Squire's at the miller's in the room by the road and the horses are standing outside.'

'Why are you so mucky?'

'The wind knocked me into a drift ...'

'Oh aye? You've had a fine old time chasing in the snow with the boys!'

'The wind pushed me over ...'

'Rip your clothes, why don't you. You'll remember, you bugger, when I've warned you with the whip.'

'It's true ... it's blowing that hard you can't stand ...'

'Away from the stove, you'll warm up right enough in the night. Tell Pietrek to get on with the threshing, go help, and stop chasing round the village like a dog with its tongue hanging out.'

'I'm going, I'll just bring a bit o' wood, the missus asked ...' he whispered gloomily, sad that he couldn't tell what he'd seen in the village. He spun about and whistled for Łapa, but the dog had curled into a ball and didn't want to listen, so he left. Boryna, meanwhile, dressed to go out, paced from wall to wall, poked the fire, nipped out to the barn and back, looked out of the window and again went out to the front of the house, waiting ever more impatiently, but no one came for him.

'Maybe they forgot,' remarked Jaguś.

'What, like they'd forget me ...'

'You go trusting the blacksmith and he's the biggest liar ...'

'Foolish woman, don't speak of what you don't understand ...'

She was silent, offended, and in vain did he mutter gentle words, until in the end he became cross himself, pulled on his hat and went out, slamming the door.

Jagna set up the distaff, sat by the window and began to spin, looking from time to time into the blizzard, raging beyond the window.

The wind howled horribly, snowy flurries as big as trees or houses tumbled in bedraggled clumps outside and beat against the cottage time after time, so that everything in the room trembled, the bowls ranged in the cupboard jingled and the wafer globes swung where they hung from the ceiling. A bitter cold gusted through the door and window, so that Łapa kept hunting for a warmer spot and Jagna wrapped herself in her apron.

Witek slipped in quietly and said timidly:

'Missus!'

'What?'

'You know, the squire came with stallions. Giant draught horses, all black, with red netting,¹ and plumes on their heads, and bells on their harness shining gold like pictures in church! And they went like the wind!'

'No wonder, they're manor horses, not village ones!'

'Jesus, I've never seen such great dragons!'

'Indeed, they do nowt and live on pure oats!'

'For sure, but if we fattened our filly, cut her tail, plaited her mane and harnessed her with the Voyt's grey, would she tear about like that, eh? Missus ...'

The dog leapt up suddenly, hackles raised, and began to bark.

'Go look, there's someone on the porch.'

But before he could, a man covered in snow was standing on the threshold. He praised God as he shook the snow from his hat and boots and looked about the chamber.

'Permit me to warm myself and catch my breath a little!' he said entreatingly.

'Sit down – Witek, stoke the fire,' she ordered, disconcerted.

The stranger sat by the chimney, warmed himself a little and lit a pipe.

'Is this Boryna's house, Maciej Boryna?' he asked, reading from a piece of paper.

'Aye, Boryna's,' she confirmed, frightened, for she took him to be an official.

'Is Father home?'

'My husband's down the village.'

'I'll wait, if I may, by the fire. I'm frozen through.'

'Sit, do. Neither bench nor fire cost owt.'

The stranger took off his sheepskin, though he was clearly cold, since he shook all over, rubbed his hands and shifted closer to the fire.

'A hard winter this year,' he murmured.

'Not easy, for sure. Some hot milk to warm you?'

'Thank you, no, but if you had some tea!'

'We had some, we did, back in autumn when my husband were sick, of the stomach. I brought it from town, but it's run out, and I don't know who would have some in the village ...'

'Seems the priest drinks it without stopping,' interrupted Witek.

'Ha, could you run and borrow some, eh?'

'No need – indeed, I have tea with me, if you could but boil some water ...'

'Boiled water!'

She propped the pot of water on the stove and sat back down to the distaff, though she did not spin, other than to whirl the spindle for appearances' sake, but peeked at him keenly, full of deep anxiety and curiosity. Who was he, what did he want? Maybe an official after registering something, since he was forever looking in his book? ... His dress was almost of the manor, grey and green, like the squire's shooters wore! But his sheepskin was a peasant one, as was his hat! Some crank maybe, or a traveller! Or maybe something quite other! She pondered, exchanging meaningful glances with Witek, who pretended to stoke the fire, but was mainly observing the stranger and greatly amazed that the man clicked his tongue at Łapa.

'He's a mad dog, he bites,' he whispered involuntarily.

'Don't worry, dogs don't bite me.' He gave a strange laugh and stroked the dog, who pressed his head to the man's knees.

Józka came in shortly, and Wawrzonowa looked in right after, then another neighbour, for news had soon spread in the neighbourhood that some stranger was at Boryna's. He went on warming himself, ignoring the people's whispers and remarks. Not until the water boiled did he retrieve some tea from a twist of paper, tipped it out, took himself a white mug from the shelf, poured over the water and, nibbling a piece of sugar, drank and paced the chamber, peering at the paintings and implements, or standing in the middle and looking so keenly and directly at people that they felt confused.

'Who made these?' He pointed to the globes hanging from the ceiling.

'Me!' squeaked Józka, reddening.

Up and down he walked again, Łapa at his heels.

'Who painted these?' he cried in amazement, stopping at the cut-outs that were stuck to the picture frames and sometimes straight on the wall.

'They're not painted, they're cut from paper!'

'No!' he exclaimed.

'I did 'em myself, so I'd know!'

'And you thought them up, eh?'

'Aye, every child in the village can do it.'

He was silent again, poured another mug of tea, sat before the fire and for the space of a good few prayers said not a word. People dispersed as evening was falling and the blizzard had quietened, so that only an occasional sharp squall sprang up, twirled, hammered and thrashed at the cottages, but increasingly rarely and flapping weakly now, like a bird that had exhausted its strength after a long flight. Jagna, too, finally set aside the distaff and set about the evening's chores.

'Did a Jakub Socha serve with you?' the stranger asked.

'That'd be Kuba! Aye, he did, but the poor wretch died, back in the autumn.'

'The priest told me. My God, I've been searching for him for years in all the villages round about and I find him only after his death ...'

'You were after our Kuba?' called Witek, moved.

'Ah, you must be the brother of the squire at Wola?'

'How do you know me?'

'People were saying that squire's brother had returned from distant lands and was searching for some Kuba in the villages, but no one knew which one.'

'Socha. I only learned today that he served with you and had died.'

'They shot him, he bled and died, he died!' cried Witek through his tears.

'Was he with you long?'

'For ever, as far as ever I remember, he were always at Boryna's.'

'He was an honest man, apparently?' he asked.

'Oh aye, the whole village can testify how everyone, even the priest, cried at his burial and they wouldn't take a thing for the service.'

'And he taught me my prayers and how to shoot, and watched over me like my father born! And he'd give me ten groszy sometimes and ...' Witek burst into tears again at the memory.

'And he were pious, a quiet, hard-working farmhand – priest himself praised him ...'

'Is he buried in your graveyard?'

'Where else?'

'I know where, I'll show you. Ambrozy put a cross up for him, and Rocho wrote out a little board 'n' all, so even with the snowdrifts I can find it, I can take you!' Witek cried.

'Well, let's be off then, before night falls.'

The stranger donned his sheepskin and stood a long moment in the middle of the chamber, lost in thought. He was old already, a little bent, grey, wizened as a wood shaving. His face was furrowed and sallow with a dent in his right cheek – the old trace of a bullet – and a long red scar above his eye, a long nose, a thin straggly beard and dark eyes, deep set and glowing intensely; he did not drop the pipe from his teeth for an instant and was constantly relighting it. He stirred eventually and wanted to give Jaguś some money, but she thrust her hands behind her back and reddened.

'Take it, nothing in the world comes for free ...'

'Ha, maybe that's the custom out in the world. Am I Jew or a merchant that I ask to be paid for water or heat!' she whispered, offended.

'God bless you for your hospitality! Tell your husband that Jacek from Wola was here. If I remember, I'll look in again some time, but now I must hurry, for night is coming. Go with God.'

'God be with you too!'

She made to kiss his hand, but he snatched it away and briskly departed from the cottage.

The first barely perceptible traces of darkness were drifting in. The gale had dropped, with only a puff of dry fine snow roused from the drifts forming dykes across the road, as though someone were beating the flour out of a muslin sack, that flurried and billowed along the ground, for above it had already quietened, so that the houses and gardens stood out more clearly from the low and languid, bluish cloud of approaching darkness.

But the village seemed roused from its torpor. The roads began to swarm with folk, voices sounded in the farmsteads; here and there they took to shovelling snow from in front of cottages, knocking holes into the ice on the pond, fetching water, opening barn doors, while the sound of threshing could be heard from the road. Sleighs too were struggling to make their way through in places and even the crows showed their faces in the yards, a sure sign of change on its way.

Pan Jacek² looked about curiously. Sometimes he'd ask about the people they ran into, or about some cottage, and he stepped so briskly that Witek could barely keep up; only Łapa ran ahead, barking joyfully.

There were such mighty drifts in front of the church that the fencing had collapsed completely and the snow reached almost to the branches of the trees. They had to go around another way, alongside the presbytery, where a whole gang of boys were chasing each other noisily, hurling snow. When Łapa barked at them, one grabbed him by the scruff and threw him into a drift of feathery, still puffing snow. Witek leapt to the rescue, but he too got no less a clodding, so that he barely clambered free. He gave near as good as he got and ran off hurriedly, for Pan Jacek was waiting.

They barely dug through to the graveyard, and there too the snow was high as a fair-sized fellow, and only the arms of the crosses stood black above the snowy humps and dykes; the spot was somewhat exposed, so the wind still buffeted through at times, and storms of snow would veil everything in a misty cloud through which loomed the trunks of naked tossing trees. The fields all around, draped in glaring whiteness, were now darkening blue, so that they could make out neither trees nor stone heaps nor copses. But just beyond the graveyard, on a buried path, a dozen people were trudging along, bent low to the ground under heavy burdens. The snowstorm obscured them so that every so often they'd disappear completely, but when it quietened, the women's woollen skirts could be seen, glowing red as they came closer, until they could be made out individually.

'What people are these – are they back from the market?'

'Nay, hired hands, been for firewood.'

'And they're carrying it on their backs?'

'Aye, they've no horses, so they must lug it on their backs.'

'Are there many such in the village?'

'Not a few, for sure. Only farmers have land, the rest lodge and go out to earn, or take a place as servants.'

'And do they go often for firewood, eh?'

'The manor lets everyone come once a week with a billhook, and whatever dry wood they can break off and gather in a cloth and carry is theirs. It's only farmers have the right to come with carts and axes to the woods ... Me and Kuba were always coming, and more than once we came back with a fine soul³ in the cart ... Kuba knew how to fell a hornbeam and hide it under the branches so that even a woodsman would never tell!' he cried with pride.

'Did Kuba ail long? Tell me everything.'

Witek did not need much prompting and told everything he knew. Pan Jacek interrupted with questions, even pulling up short with emotion, spreading his hands and exclaiming aloud, but the boy did not mark what he meant and why he was so surprised. To tell the truth, he was not paying attention, as he was growing frightened, given that it was darkening already and the whole graveyard was changing into a deathly shroud and speaking in many voices. He ran ahead, searching for Kuba's cross with terrified eyes, until he found it at last, right by the fence, alongside the tombstones of those fallen in the war where he'd prayed at All Souls.

'Aye here, it's written on the cross: Jakub Socha!' he spelled out, tracing the great white letters with his finger. 'Rocho wrote it, and Ambrozy fixed up the cross!'

Pan Jacek gave him a couple of zlotys and told him to hurry home.

The boy galloped off, turning back only once to whistle for Łapa and see what the other was doing.

'Jesus! Squire's brother and he's kneeling at Kuba's grave!' he whispered, astonished, but with darkness falling and the trees overhead shaking so terribly, such a terror seized him that he flew back to the village across the fields. He did not stop until he reached the church, where he caught his breath and looked at the coins that he held tight in his fist. The dog caught up and they returned slowly to the cottage together.

Near the pond he ran across Antek, coming back from work. The dog hurled himself at him, fawning, barking and whining with joy, until Antek began to stroke him.

'Good dog, fine boy, good dog! Where are you coming from, Witek?'

Witek told him everything, aye, though he did not mention the money.

'Look in on the children some time.'

'I'll come by, I'll come by. I even made a little cart for Pietruś and a mannikin ...'

'Bring it then – here's ten kopecks so you don't forget!'

'I will right quick, I'll just check the master's not back ...'

'Is he not home, then?' he asked as if indifferent, but fair trembling.

'Why, they're in council at the miller's with the squire and some others!'

'Is the mistress home?' Antek asked more quietly.

'Aye, they're busy at home. I'll just go see and be out in a flash ...'

'Come, come!' he whispered, wanting to ask, find out, but did not dare; people were milling about, though it was growing dark, and besides the boy was a fool – he'd blab in a flash, tell everything abroad ... He headed homeward quickly, but in front of the church he looked around carefully, to see if anyone was watching, and turned to one side, on to the path running behind the barns.

Witek, meanwhile, ran to the cottage.

Boryna was not back yet. It was dark in the room, the only light from the torches glowing by the hearth. Jagna was bustling about the evening tasks, but crossly, since Józka had disappeared somewhere again and there was work aplenty so that she hardly knew where to begin! She wasn't even listening to Witek's tales, until he mentioned Antek, when she suddenly stopped and pricked up her ears ...

'Don't tell that he gave you ten kopecks.'

'I'll not breathe a word if you say so.'

'Here's another. And mark well. Did he go home?'

Jagna did not bother waiting for his answer but darted forwards suddenly as if in fright and ran out on to the porch, calling for Pietrek and casting a fearful wary glance over the orchard and fences. She even looked behind the hayrick, but there was no one ... She calmed down quickly, but such a gloominess seized her that she began to shout at Józka, chivvying her to hurry and water the cows, and scolding her for hanging about the cottage and forever doing nothing. Nor did the girl hold her tongue, for she was bold, impudent and stubborn, so they quarrelled like for like.

'Mouth away, wait till your father's back – he'll shut you up with his strap!' threatened Jagna, lighting the lamp and taking up her spinning again. She didn't bother to reply to Józka's mutterings, because it seemed to her that someone was walking past the gable window ...

'Witek, take a look, a piglet must've climbed out of the sty and is wandering about there or in the orchard.'

But Witek assured her he'd rounded them all up and closed the door. Józka went to the other side of the house and together with Pietrek they set about carrying buckets of water to the cows. She then ran in to fetch the pails for milking.

'I'll milk them – you take a rest, since you've worked so hard!' said Jagna.

'Go on then, and leave half the milk in the udders as usual!' needled Józka.

'Shut your mouth!' Jagna yelled crossly as she shoved on her clogs, hitched up her woollen skirt, picked up the pail and went to the byre.

Evening had fallen now, the wind had stopped, the snowstorm had settled, but the sky hung black, starless, swollen with great low clouds. The snows were grey and gloomy, a tired oppressive silence hung mournfully, not a sound reaching them from the village except the distant, hollow beating of hammers coming from the smithy.

It was dark and stuffy in the byre. The cows were lapping the water and loudly grating their tongues against the bottom of the buckets, sighing heavily from time to time.

Jagna groped for the stool and, finding it, she crouched by the first cow at the end, massaged the udders, wiped them on her apron and, leaning her head against the cow's belly, began to milk her.

Silence enveloped her, so she could hear the slightest rustle clearly; the milk spurted again and again into the pail, the horses' stamping reached her from the stable, while from the cottage came the muffled but shrill sound of Józka holding forth.

'Prattling she is, but she ain't peeling potatoes!' muttered Jagna and was suddenly silent, listening, for the snow had crunched outside, as though someone were approaching from the right side of the shed, slowly by the sound of it ... pausing even ... for all was quiet for a moment ... then again it continued ... the snow crunched ever closer ... She threw back her head and looked towards the grey opening of the door ... A vague figure loomed ...

'Pietrek!' she called.

'Hush, Jaguś, hush!'

'Antek!'

She froze completely and every drop of strength drained from her so that she could not force out a single word more. She could not move, was unable to think; she only pulled at the cow's udders distractedly, so that milk spurted over her skirt and on to the ground. She was flooded with heat that swept through her like a burning flame, lightning flashed in her eyes and swelled her heart with sweetness, and something caught so at her throat, knocking the breath out of her, it was a wonder she didn't drop down dead ...

'I've been on the lookout for you right from Yuletide, every day, keeping watch like a dog every evening by the hayrick, and you didn't come!' he whispered.

And that stifled, passionate voice, burning with the force of love, surging with emotion, drenching her in heat, fire, sweetness, a powerful cry ... He stood facing her. She felt him lean against the cow; he bent over and was looking at her from so close that his hot breath scalded her head.

'Don't be afraid, Jaguś – won't you speak to me?'

'What can I say, what?' she whispered tearfully.

They both fell silent, unable to speak, choked with emotion and that nearness, that longed-for encounter, this night that had tumbled upon them unawares, with its sweet weight but strange fear! They had yearned for each other, and now it was too hard, too difficult to utter a single word; they desired each other, but it was impossible even to stretch out a hand – they said nothing.

The cow slurped her water loudly, flicking her flanks with her tail so that she lashed his face again and again, until he caught it firmly, leaned further over the cow's withers and whispered again:

'I cannot sleep, I cannot eat, I cannot do a thing because of you, Jaguś, because of you ...'

'It's not easy for me neither, no ...'

'Did you think of me ever, Jaguś, did you?'

'How could I not, when you come to mind all the time, all the time, so I hardly know what to do with myself. Is it true you beat Mateusz over me?'

'It's true. He were lying about you, so I shut his trap for 'im, and I'll do the same to anyone!'

The door to the cottage slammed and someone was running quickly across the yard, straight to the byre, so that Antek barely had time to jump between the mangers and crouch down.

'Józka said to bring the pails. It's time to get the pigfeed ready.'

'Take 'em both, go on,' she could hardly blurt.

'But Patch has not yet finished drinking. I'll come back later.'

Witek ran off, and the door was heard slamming again, then Antek slipped out of his hiding place.

'He'll be back, the bugger ... I'll go to the hayrick, I'll wait ... will you come out, Jaguś?'

'I'm afraid to ...'

'Come, even in an hour or two, I'll be waiting, come!' he begged.

He moved up from behind, for she was sitting all the time by the cow, encircled her powerfully across her breast with his arms, tilted her head back and pressed his mouth so hard to her lips that she lost her breath, her hands fell, the pail flew to the ground. She swooned but tensed all the more and pressed her lips so frenziedly against his that they were joined unto death. They fell into each other's arms, and were locked in a long, mad, wild and frantic kiss.

He broke away at last and furtively ran out of the byre.

She jumped up to leap after him, but his shadow flashed across the threshold and vanished into the night. He was gone, but that quiet burning whisper still chimed within her so strongly and so imperiously that she looked round the byre in astonishment ... Aye, there was no one there – only the cows chewing their fodder, swishing their tails. She peeked outside. Deepest night was upon the threshold, the world was smothered in silence, except for the hammering that rang in the distance ... But he had been there, he had ... he'd stood right by her, taken her in his arms, kissed her ... her lips were still burning, the flames were still shooting through her like lightning, and such a cry of joy was gathering in her heart, how not to voice it! Jesus, my Jesus! Something snatched her up and lifted her, so that she would have followed him into the wide world, now, anywhere, in a flash! ... 'Jantoś!' she cried involuntarily and the sound of her own voice finally roused her a little. She rushed as fast as she could to finish the milking, but was so shaken that she kept groping for the udders under the cows' bellies and was so beside herself with happiness that it was only on returning to the cottage in the frost that she noticed her face was wet with tears. She brought in the milk, but forgot to strain it; she ran to the other side of the house, for she'd heard Nastka's voice, but said nothing to her and went back, adorned herself before the mirror, then added some logs to the fire, recalled that she had something urgent to do ... but couldn't remember what, nor anything else, nothing ... for the only thing fixed in her thoughts was that Antek was waiting by the hayrick, waiting ... She spun about the chamber, disoriented, threw her apron over her head and went out. She crept slowly past the windows and followed the gable wall to a narrow path between the orchard and the shed, under a roof of branches heavy with snow, so that she had to stoop.

Antek was lurking by the stile. He leapt at her like a wolf, practically carried her over and pulled her under the hayrick, which stood just by the track.

But things did not quite go their way that day, for as soon as they had climbed into the hay, where they fell upon each other with kisses, the sharp, resonant voice of Boryna rang out.

'Jaguś, Jaguś!'

They shot apart as though struck by a thunderbolt. Antek leapt sideways and tore along the orchards stealthily, and Jagna ran to the yard, not noticing that the branches had snatched the apron from her head and showered her with snow. She rubbed her face with snow, gathered a handful of wood from the shed and slowly, calmly returned to the chamber.

The old man glowered at her strangely.

'I was checking Greyling. She's been groaning and trying to lie down ...'

'I looked for you in the byre, but I didn't see you ...'

'I'd gone to the shed, to get some wood.'

'Where did you get so messed with snow?'

'Where? There's snowy beards hanging from the thatch, you need only touch 'em and they fall on your head,' she explained calmly, but turned to the fire to hide her flushed face.

But she didn't fool the old man, for though he did not look her directly in the eye, still he could well see that she was all aflame, and red, her eyes blazing bright as though in a fever. Some deep, vague suspicion slid into his heart. A barbed jealousy growled within him like a dog and like a dog it crouched. Long he puzzled and pondered, until finally it came to his head that it was surely Mateusz who had met her and pinned her to the fence somewhere.

Nastka came in at that moment, so he set about pulling her by the tongue.

'Well, so Mateusz is well now, walking is he?'

'Ha, as if!'

'Someone told me they saw him in the afternoon, apparently walking about the village,' he went on slyly, but keenly watching Jagna.

'They're talking rubbish, whatever pops into their heads. Mateusz can barely move, can't lift his head, except that he's not bleeding no more. Ambrozy cupped him today, and now he's prepared some vodka and nice fat snacks and they're both having a grand old time taking their medicine. You can hear the singing as far as the road.'

He asked no more, but could not shake off his suspicions.

Jagusia, oppressed by the silence and those spying eyes of his that gave her no peace, began to recount at length the arrival of Pan Jacek. He was greatly amazed at this and began guessing as to what it could mean, puzzling considerably, weighing, deliberating, turning every word over in his head, until in the end it emerged from all this that the squire had sent Pan Jacek to him to find out what the people would say about clearing the trees.

'But he didn't ask a thing about the wood.'

'Ha, that sort will distract you so as you won't even mark what, how or when, and suddenly you've told him everything. Ho, ho, I know that manor type.'

'I'm telling you, he asked only about Kuba and about those cut-outs!'

'He's beating about the bush, to spy the lie of the land! There's something in it, some manor trickery, how else! Squire's brother and he'd go on about Kuba! Only a fool'd believe such tales.

They say this Jacek's a bit weak in the head, he's forever wandering the villages, playing the fiddle by the holy figures and blathering nonsense. He said he'd come by, did he?'

'He did and asked about you.'

'Well, well. I cannot get my head around it.'

'Did you see the squire?'' she asked softly, not to give him time to ponder.

He flinched, as though a goose had pecked at his weak spot.

'No, I was at Szymon's all evening,' he said and was silent.

She did not dare question further, for he flung himself about the house like a mad dog, shouting at any old thing, scolding, fulminating, so that all of them were quiet as mice, each one glad to get out of his sight and not catch it for something.

And so they sat down in this sour silence to supper, and when Rocho came in, he sat at his usual place before the fire, wanting nothing to eat, and when they'd finished, he said quietly:

'I've not come on my own account. In the village they're saying that the squire has taken against Lipce and that he won't summon a single villager for the felling. I've come to ask if it's true.'

'Father and Son, how am I to know? First I've heard of it.'

'They held council today at the miller's, that's whence the news stems.'

'The Voyt, miller and blacksmith held council, not me!'

'How so, they say the squire himself was at yours and that you went with him.'

'I did not confer with them, believe what you want, I'm telling you the truth ...'

He did not admit how greatly this oversight hurt him, and that they'd held council without him!

Boryna was incensed again at the reminder, but he remained silent and just chewed over the insult like stinging nettles, restraining himself as best he could, so that Rocho would not mark what was going on with him!

Why, he'd waited, looked out like an idiot, and they had conferred without him! He would not forgive them, and they would know it. Nothing to them, was he? He'd show them what he meant in the village. It was the miller, none other, who had done it, that farmhand, the gadabout. He'd made good on the backs of other folk, and now lorded it above the rest, the swindler. He knew things about him that would put him behind bars even, oh he did ... Or that Voyt! Fit to watch cattle, not lead his elders, the old soak. They'd made him Voyt, but they could just as easily chuck him out tomorrow and pick Ambrozy – why not? They'd get as much joy of him! And the blacksmith, poxy little son-in-law! Let him just show his face here! Or that squire, like a wolf circling the people, prowling and sniffing to see what he could snatch! A gentleman, the scum, sitting on peasant lands, selling peasant forests, living on peasant goodwill, and now he'd be conspiring against the people! Scum, he didn't heed that the flail marks a gentleman's hide same as any other! But he spoke not a word of these deliberations; he was not a woman after all, to complain in front of others, seeking fellowship! It ate at him something grievous, pained him even, greatly, but that was no one's business! He soon marked that it was not customary to sit trap shut before a guest, so he got up from the bench and said:

'You bring tidings, but if the squire digs in his heels and takes no one, he cannot be forced.'

'True, but if someone honest were to put to him how many folk will suffer for it, maybe he would relent.'

'I'll not go begging him!' he cried sharply.

'But there are twenty hired hands at least in the village, desperate as mercy for work! You know yourself who, and the winter's hard, snows, frost, several have had their potatoes freeze already, and no money coming in. Before spring comes, there'll be a preharvest so lean it doesn't bear thinking of! Already it's come to misery for some who eat a hot meal but once a day and go to bed on an empty stomach! Everyone had reckoned that if the squire were to start felling at Wolf's Hollow, there would be work for all! And here it seems he's vowed not to take on a single man from Lipce! He's angered that apparently a complaint was lodged against him at the commissioner's.'

'I signed it myself and I will stand by it; he'll not cut a single fir till he comes to agreement with us and gives us what's ours.'

'Well, that way maybe they won't fell the wood!'

'Not ours, they won't.'

'But what about the poor then, eh?' he groaned.

'I can do nothing for them, and I cannot give them my work after all. What if something happens to me while I'm defending others, minding their interests, then who'll help me? The dog maybe ...'

'I can see from this you're not with the manor.'

'I'm with myself and with justice, mark you. I've other things on my shoulders. So I won't be crying that some Wojtek or Bartek has nothing to put in his mouth. That's the priest's business, not mine! One man, even if he wanted, cannot do everything.'

'But he can do a lot, a lot,' put in Rocho, sadly.

'Just try carrying water in a sieve and you'll see how much you fetch – that's how it is with poverty. That's how God has ordered it, seems to me, and how it will stay, that one man has enough, and another catches the wind.'

Rocho only nodded his head and left heavy of heart, for he hadn't expected such hardness in the face of people's poverty from Boryna. The old man walked him to the fence as he did each day and went to the byre to look in on the cows and horses, for it was growing late.

Jagna was making the bed and just shaking out the quilt, reciting her prayers under her breath, when Maciej came in and threw some snow-covered rag to her feet.

'You're losing your aprons. I found it by the stile!' he said quietly but so curtly and with such a piercing look that she froze in alarm and only a moment later began to bleat in explanation:

'It's ... that Łapa ... whatever he can grab ... drags it out the house ... Yesterday he made off with my clogs to his kennel! Scurvy dog, the mischief ...'

'Łapa ... what the ... well, well ...' he whispered with a sneer, for he didn't believe a word of it ...

CHAPTER 7

It was Three Kings, which this year had fallen on a Monday, and before the end of evensong. The organ and singing could still be heard coming from church, and folk were already slowly traipsing towards the inn, for there was to be music for the first time since Advent and Yuletide and they were celebrating the betrothal of Małgośka Kłab and Wicek Socha, who, though he carried the same surname as the late-lamented Kuba, denied all kinship with him, for the shameful youth prided himself on his morgen alone.

Word had it too that Stacho Płoszka, who'd been making up to the Soltys's Ulisia since the autumn potato lifting, would surely drink on the matter today and arrange everything with the old man, who looked askance at him and refused him his daughter, saying Stacho was a regular ruffian, an unbribeable harum-scarum and forever quarrelling with his parents, and for his Ulisia he wanted a whole four morgen or two thousand zlotys in his hand and two cows' tails into the bargain.

The Voyt too was celebrating today, but a christening and at his place, though a bunch of his cronies reckoned that when he'd livened up, he'd have enough of home and would tumble into the inn with the whole company and stand them all a round.

And over and beyond these enticements there were still greater, graver matters, touching all equally. For it so happened that at High Mass they'd learned from folk from other villages that the squire, who had need of people for the felling, had already made agreements and put down payments: from Rudki ten were to go, from Modlica fifteen and Dębica about eight, and of the Rzepki gentry nigh on twenty – but from Lipce, not a single one. The truth of it was clear and certain, for the woodsman himself, who was at High Mass, had confirmed it.

The poor were much and heavily dismayed on account of this.

For indeed, there were rich men through and through in Lipce, and there were lesser men who did not count on such earnings, and there were also those whom poverty squeezed until the pips squeaked, but who'd not own up to it at any cost, in order not to lose friendship with the wealthy, and stood on the side of the latter in all things. But there were also plenty of hired hands and those who owned no more than a cottage, who threshed for the farmers, wielded an axe at the mill, took whatever work they could, and by hook or by crook scraped together just enough to get by with God's help, leaving still five or so families for whom in wintertime there was no work at all in the village, and these were waiting for the felling as for salvation.

And now what was to be done?

The winter was harsh, hardly anyone had even a grosz put by, many were coming to the end of their potatoes, there was poverty in the house and hunger round the corner, baring its teeth, spring far off, and no help to be seen, so it was no surprise that tribulations weighed powerful heavy on the soul. They gathered in the cottages, deliberating, until at last they went as a body to Kłab, for him to go at their head to the priest for advice, but Kłab declined, supposedly on account of his daughter's betrothal; others too wriggled out of it like eels, for they minded only their own affairs and had their own interests. Bartek of the sawmill was sorely angered by this, for though he had work, he always stood by the poor, and together with Filip from over the pond, Stach, Bylica's son-in-law, Bartek Kozioł and wry-mouthed Walek, the five of them went to the priest to ask if he would intercede for them with the squire.

They were not seen for some time, until after vespers Ambrozy came running to the Kobuses' house and said they were in council with the priest and would soon be at the inn.

Evening had come in the meantime and the last glimmers of twilight had faded completely, so that only here and there in the west did grey embers glow like dying firebrands and the world slowly wrapped itself in night's cold blue sheet. There was no moon yet; only a cool icy glare shone from the dry frozen snows, rendering everything lifeless and shrouded in a deathly robe. A sprinkling of stars began to appear across the dark sky, growing, shimmering and shining so bright from afar, they made the snow sparkle. A hard frost was taking hold and so bitter it made your ears ring, and even the quietest of voices echoed far and wide.

In the cottages, meanwhile, they were lighting fires and busy with the evening tasks, still fetching water from the pond. The creak of a small gate might still be heard or the lowing of a cow, or someone hurrying by on a sleigh, and people scuttled quickly about the farmsteads for the cold scorched their faces like hot iron and stopped the breath, but it was quiet in the village now.

At the inn, however, the sound of music was louder than ever, and indeed from almost every cottage someone stole away to hear some news, along with others who were there neither for the betrothal nor any other business but were drawn by the smell of vodka. And since it was dull for the women to stay at home and the girls were fair squealing for a bit of fun and to tap their feet to music, then time and again, before it turned completely black, they scampered furtively to the inn, ostensibly to scold the men and bid them come home, but then staying themselves. And indeed the older children trailed after their fathers, especially the boys, who summoned each other from the farmyards with a whistle and went in bands, crowding the inn's hallway and earth benches, though the frost seared like fire.

Inside the inn, a sizeable throng was milling about.

A fine fire was crackling in the chimney, so that half the room was flooded with the blood-red light of burning logs and the Jew kept ordering the girl to throw on another, for whoever entered, brushed off their boots by the hearth, warmed their numb hands and disappeared into the crowd to find their mates, who, despite the fire and the lamp above the bar, were hard to make out immediately in the darkness clagging every corner of the room. At the road end, the musicians sat on cabbage barrels, strumming casually from time to time, for the dancing was not yet properly under way, with only the most eager couple or two taking a spin. In the chamber, meanwhile, folk crowded in groups at the tables against the walls, but hardly anyone was clutching a glass and drinking. They just chatted, looking about and marking who came in.

The greatest clamour was at the bar, where Kłab's guests clustered with the Socha tribe, toasting each other but sporadically as yet, and just standing and talking with great decorum, as befitted a betrothal.

Meanwhile, all cast frequent stealthy glances towards the windows where a dozen Rzepki villagers were sitting at the tables. They'd been there since early in the day and had not left. No one insulted them, but no goodwill came their way either, except from Ambrozy, who was soon chummy and knocking back the vodka smartly and joshing for all he was worth. Beside them stood Bartek from the sawmill with his crew, reporting what the good father had told them, and fulminating mightily against the squire. He was loudly echoed by Wojtek Kobus, a dry fellow, small but so fiery that he was forever leaping to his feet, hammering his fist on the table and screeching like the bird whose name he bore,¹ which he did deliberately, guessing that the Rzepki men were heading to the woods next day for felling, but not one of them gave any sign of hearing a thing, they sat so calm and intent on their own business.

None of the farmers heard these invectives or took it much to heart that the priest did not want to put a word in for them with the squire. On the contrary, the louder the shouts the more folk turned away and avoided them, for in the crush bursting the inn at its seams each could seek company to their own taste and buy where it suited them best, without minding their neighbours. Jagustynka alone went from group to group, goading, mocking, bending ears with gossip, but keenly alert to where bottles were clinking and glasses being passed.

And so slowly, bit by bit, imperceptibly, folk were drawn into the fun, for an ever-greater hubbub filled the chamber and glasses rang ever more frequently, and it grew ever tighter, so that now the door could hardly be closed, and still they came, more and more of them – until the musicians, well watered by Kłab, struck up a thunderous mazurka and the first pair to hit the floor were Socha and Małgośka, followed by anyone who fancied it.

But not many took to dancing, taking their lead from Lipce's first bachelors, the Płoszkas' Stach, Wachnik, the Voyt's brother and others, who were chatting in the corners with the lasses, conversing gaily and in low voices, mocking the so-called gentry from Rzepki, on whom Ambrozy was still fawning.

It was at this point that Mateusz appeared, still with a stick, for he was barely out of his bed, but he was bored without the sight of folk and soon called for vodka boiled with honey. He sat by the hearth, sipping his drink and calling out merrily to his friends, then fell silent suddenly, for Antek was standing in the doorway and had spotted him. Lifting his head boldly and flashing his eyes about the room, Antek walked right by as if unaware of him.

Mateusz rose and called:

'Boryna! Over here.'

'Come over yourself if you've got a problem,' he said sharply, thinking Mateusz was accosting him.

'I would, but I can't yet move without a stick,' he answered mildly.

Antek didn't trust him. He frowned menacingly and approached, but Mateusz caught hold of his arm and made him sit on the bench.

'Sit by me. You shamed me in front of everyone, gave me such a beating, you bastard, that they called the priest, but I've no anger towards you and I come to you first with a word of accord. Have a drink with me. No one has ever beaten me up and I thought there was no one who could. You're a proper strongman, to toss a fellow like me like a sheaf, well, well ...'

'On account of you'd never give over needling me, and then barked nasty. It provoked me, and I no longer cared what I were doing.'

'It's true, what you say. Aye, I say so myself and not out o' fear, but in good part ... Well, you saw to me proper, drawing blood and snapping ribs. Here's to you, Antek – what the heck, put your anger aside, as I've put mine behind me, though my back still hurts ... Why, you must be stronger than Wawrzek from Wola ...'

'I gave him a beating back at the harvest indulgences. I hear he's still recovering ...'

'Big Wawrzek! So I heard tell, but I didn't believe it, no. Jew! Arak with essence, look sharp, or my fist!' he shouted.

'But what you were mouthing to the lads, it's not true, is it?' Antek asked quietly.

'It's not, I were sounding off out o' spite, just because ... no, I never,' he denied, peering at the bottle under the light so that the other could not read the truth in his eyes.

They had another drink, then Antek bought a round and they drank again, and so they sat, side by side, completely as brothers and in such friendship that the whole inn marvelled at it. Mateusz, meanwhile, since he'd had a good few drinks, shouted for the musicians to up the pace, tapped his foot and laughed out loud to the boys, until he quietened and began to talk in Antek's ear.

'Aye, it's true I wanted to take her, but she harrowed my face with her claws, like someone had dragged it across the briars. She liked you better, you. I know it well, don't deny it, and because of that she wouldn't look at me! It's hard to lead an ox where it won't go of its own accord; the jealousy, that gnawed at me, I cannot begin to tell you! The lass is a wonder, there's no greater beauty, and she went for the old man, wronging you; that I cannot understand ...'

'Wronging me and bringing me to ruin!' Antek moaned quietly and almost leapt up, for the fire rose up in him so at the memory, but instead he just cursed and muttered something to himself.

'Quiet, people will hear and are ready to spread gossip.'

'Did I say sommat?'

'Well, I didn't catch it, aye, but others might've.'

'I can hardly stand it, my chest is exploding and the words burst out despite me, aye ...'

'I'm telling you, don't give in, while there's still time,' Mateusz advised slyly, slowly drawing the other out.

'Can I help it, when loving's worse than sickness, rips through the bones like fire, seethes in your heart, and grips your soul with such craving? You can't eat, sleep, do a thing, till all you want is to beat your head against the wall and give up living at all!'

'Don't I know it! Jesus, didn't I run after Jagna myself! But there's only one answer for loving: get married, it vanishes in an instant. Or another way: if you cannot by marriage, get yourself the woman, and the taste for her will pass and the loving will end! It's the truth I'm telling, I've had a bit o' practice!' he asserted boastfully.

'And if it still don't pass?' he said sadly.

'Aye indeed, the kind that sighs behind the fence, lurks behind the quoins, and whose legs turn to jelly when a skirt rustles by – that kind won't change quick, but that's a calf not a man. I wouldn't give even a grosz for such a one,' Mateusz declared with contempt.

'It's God's truth what you say, but seems to me there are such men, there are,' Antek pondered.

'Drink to me, here, my throat's dry as a whistle! Son-of-a-bitch, devil take the women, such runts, some of 'em – she'd turn a somersault if you blew on her, yet there she goes leading the strongest man like a calf on a string. She'll take your strength, take your reason and leave you a laughing stock in front of everyone to boot! Satan's spawn they are, I tell you – drink to me!'

'To you brother, to you!'

'God bless you – I'm telling you, spit on that devil's spawn, you've your own mind ...'

They downed another and chatted on. Antek was now a mite drunk, and since he never had anyone to pour out his troubles to, a mad desire overtook him to spill everything, so that he could barely restrain himself, but for the odd meaningful word he let slip, from which Mateusz marked everything anyway, though he didn't let it show.

In the inn, meanwhile, the jollities were in full swing. The musicians had struck up with gusto and dance followed dance. There was drinking in every corner now, and disagreements here and there already, and everywhere the talk so loud that the room was all a-clamour, and the clomping of the dancers echoed like the beating of flails. Kłab's company had staggered to the snug, from where a fair racket could also be heard. Only Socha and Małgośka danced with abandon or, arms about each other, ran into the frost for some air. Bartek from the sawmill still stood on the spot with his lot, drinking from a second bottle now, while Wojtek Kobus was yelling at the Rzepki folk:

'Gentry, the scum! Sacks and rags and think 'emselves gentry!'

'To the manner born, half the village milks a single cow!' another threw in bitingly.

'Mat-heads – they do without horses, and ride on their fleas.'

'Jewish hirelings!'

'Squire's pushovers – should be set loose with the hounds, both have a nose for a good thing!'

'Sniffed out their own kind at the manor.'

'Taking our people's work.'

'We'll brush out those birds' nests so well you'll be fleeing headless!'

'Slovens and bums – not enough stove lighting for the Jews, so they've rushed our way!'

They taunted them doggedly, one or two shook a fist and yelled, more and more folk pressed forward, surrounding them more impetuously all the time, borne along by the vodka now, but the Rzepki folk did not answer. Sitting side by side in a band, they simply squeezed their staffs between their knees, sipped their beer, bit on the sausage they'd brought with them, and boldly, dauntlessly, surveyed the villagers.

It might well have come to blows but for Kłab, who rushed in, began to soothe, explain and plead, and after him the elders and Ambrozy, so that Kobus stopped his yapping and the others were dragged away to the bar for refreshment. Then the music started to play vigorously and Ambrozy again began spinning his fantastical tales of wars, of Napoleon and the Commander-in-Chief,² and then other droll stories, so that more than one all but fell about laughing, while he, well pleased and pretty drunk, leaned against the table and held forth:

'I'll tell just one more tale, a short one, for I'm keen to dance and the lasses are crook that I'm not on my way! Today, as you know, is the betrothal of Kłab's lass with Wicek Socha. Had I wanted, it'd be me with Małgośka, me! It were like this: on Thursday, they roll up at old Kłab's with the vodka! From Socha's and from Pryczek's at the same time; one lot are drinking arak and the other sweet stuff. Kłab takes a drink with one lot and he don't pour out the other either. One's good, and the other's not bad!'

'The matchmakers are in a fair sweat, advancing and praising their bachelors: this one's got some grand morgen fertilized by larks, and the other's got some just as fine where only the dogs frisk. One's got a cottage where pigs climb under the sill-beams and the other's no worse off. You'd search far and wide for a wealthier pair! Socha's got a whole sheepskin collar, for mutts have made off with the rest, while Pryczek's got a button on his Sunday trews and another that shines like gold! One boy's slender as a stack o' straw, the other's got a stomach bloated with potatoes! A grand pair o' lads! Socha dribbles and Pryczek's bleary-eyed!'

'Equal on every score, and that hard-working and keen, they'd eat half a quart o' potatoes in one sitting and look about for more! Both good sons-in-law, both can mind a cow, sweep the house, toss the muck. Neither'll hurt the lass at all, for they don't keep company with storks. Fine lads, talkative, wisecracks, canny, always aim their food at their gobs, and nowhere else.'

'What to do when both seem equal to the old man? He paces about the house, picks his nose and asks Małgośka: "Which one d'you want?"'

'"They're both freaks, Pa, might as well let Ambrozy choose!"'

'The old man shakes his head, deliberates, it's clear he's got a good head on his shoulders, and here the lads are hustling, making their cases, on and on. He takes a drink of arak from one lot, takes the sweet stuff from the others and says:

'"Bring us the scales!"'

'They bring the scales, place 'em down, and says he:

'"Weigh yourselves, lads. I'll take whoever's the heavier as my son-in-law."

'The matchmakers are a-frazzle, they send for vodka and consider: which one? For both were like wizened fleas! The Pryczek matchmakers have a brainwave and shove some stones in their lad's bosom and more in his pockets. But the Socha lot are no fools either. With nothing else to hand, they stick a goose under their boy's capote and set him on the scales ... They're measuring and here's something going, "Sss ... sss ... sss ..." Socha, it seems, but plonk, a goose lands on the floor! Everyone falls about laughing, and Kłab says:

'"You're a canny bastard. You've not much weight, but you'll be my son-in-law!"'

Indeed, though there was not a word of truth in it other than the weighing, Ambrozy told it so comically that they cried with laughter and their guffaws rang out throughout the whole inn.

Since Kłab's guests had tumbled out of the snug and now advanced as a body to dance, the uproar, stamping and shouts intensified, so that no single voice could be made out clearly.

Heads began to swim, the heat to overwhelm. Their merriment grew and the young caroused at full pelt; the elders, meanwhile, occupied the tables, finding companions where they could and where they stood, for the dancers crashed about and formed an ever-wider circle. Everyone talked at the tops of their voices, drinking steadily, enjoying themselves together, having their say, and making the most of the holiday.

The music rang out at fever pitch and the dancers swung wildly, though there was such a crush they were now head to head and shoulder to shoulder, prancing and careering about the room, shouting merrily and stamping their heels so hard the floorboards creaked and the bar jiggled!

It was a grand party, for everyone threw themselves into it, body and soul. Winter was coming, folk had torn their work-worn hands from Mother Earth and straightened their bent backs, raised their careworn souls, stretched and stood tall, all equal in freedom, repose and that ease of thought that makes each person distinct and clear as in a forest where you cannot distinguish the trees in summer, when they stand in a single, solid green thicket clinging to their native soil, but let the snow only fall and veil the ground and suddenly you can make each tree out separately and recognize in a flash if it be oak, or hornbeam, or aspen!

And so it was with folk.

Only Antek and Mateusz remained in their places. They sat comradely, side by side, nattering quietly of this and that, except that someone was always pausing beside them and adding their piece. Stacho Płoszka came, Balcerek came, the Voyt's brother, and others: all the first bachelors in the village, who had been groomsmen at Jagusia's wedding. At first they stood by cautiously, since there was no knowing if Antek wouldn't lash them with some sharp word, but no, he gave everyone his hand and looked at them with goodwill. They soon encircled him tightly, listened keenly, declared their friendship and so fawned and deferred to him in everything as before, when he still led among them, that he smiled a little bitterly, for he remembered how it was only yesterday that these same fellows shunned him from afar along the road.

'You're nowhere to be seen, you never come by the inn!' said Płoszka.

'I work from morning till night, so when would I have time for the inn?'

'True, true!' They nodded quietly, and then slowly moved on to various village matters. They spoke of fathers and lasses, and of the winter, but conversation flagged somehow. Antek said little, and was forever glancing towards the door, hoping that Jagna would come. Only when Balcerek began to tell of the council regarding the forest that took place at Kłab's at Christmas did he listen with attention.

'What did they resolve?' he asked.

'What indeed. They whined, complained, lamented, but came to no conclusion save that the felling should not be allowed to go ahead.'

'Like that bunch o' straw-heads'll come up with anything o' sense!' exclaimed Płoszka.

'They get together, drink vodka, have a good moan and groan and their conferring's as much use as last year's snow. The squire can happily get on and chop down the whole forest.'

'He can't be allowed to,' Mateusz put in tersely.

'Who'll stop him, who'll forbid it?' they began to shout.

'Who, if not you?'

'Oh aye, they'll let that happen?' I spoke up once – my father shouted me down to keep my nose out of it, that it weren't my business but theirs, the farmers! Aye, they have the right, for they hold everything in their grasp and won't let it go for a minute, and as for us, we count no more than farmhands!' Płoszka blustered.

'It's bad all right, bad.'

'Shouldn't be this way!'

'Aye, they should let the young in on the land and decisions.'

'And let the old 'uns be pensioned off!'

'I've served my time in the army, the years are creeping up on me but they won't give me what's mine!' cried Płoszka.

'It's time for everyone who's owed their due.'

'We're all ill done by here.'

'And Antek most of all!'

'It's time to sort this village out!' Szymek, Jagusia's brother, whispered sternly. He had joined them just now and stood quietly behind the others. They glanced at him in surprise as he pushed to the front and began hotly airing his grievances, looking everyone in the eye and blushing, as he was not used to talking in front of others and was still a little afraid of his mother.

'Nastka's taught him sense!' someone whispered and they all laughed, until Szymek fell silent and retreated to the shadows. Then the Voyt's brother, Grzela Rakoski, though he was not a talker and stuttered, began to hold forth.

'The old 'uns holding on to the land and not giving their children a look-in, that's bad, aye, for it's an injustice – but the worst of it is that they manage things badly. Take that wood: if they'd agreed with the squire, it would've been long over.'

'You what? He was giving two morgen a piece, when we're owed four to every half-volok.'³

'Owed or not, that's not clear, that's for the officials to sort out.'

'When they're hand in glove with the squire!'

'Ha, whether they are or not, the commissioner himself said not to settle for two morgen, so the squire has to give more!' Bartek explained.

'Hush now, blacksmith's coming with the gendarme!' whispered Mateusz.

They looked round at the door, for the blacksmith was entering arm in arm with the gendarme, both pretty drunk by now and pushing through the crowd, straight to the bar, but they did not stand there long, for the Jew led them to the snug.

'They got smashed at the Voyt's christening.'

'Today was it?' asked Antek.

'Oh aye, that's where our old men are. The Soltys went to be godfather with Balcerek's missus, since old Boryna had taken offence and didn't want to,' Płoszka explained.

'And who's that?' cried Balcerek.

'That's Pan Jacek, squire's brother from Wola!' explained Grzela. They even rose to take a look, for Pan Jacek was slowly edging through and searching for someone with his eyes, until he spotted Bartek from the sawmill and went with him to stand at the wall, by the Rzepki lot.

'What can he want?'

'Sommatt and nowt; he wanders about the villages, nattering with folk, helps out, plays his fiddle, teaches the lasses ditties. Apparently he's a bit soft in the head.'

'Finish what you were saying, Grzela, go on!'

'I were talking of the forest; my advice is this: not to leave these matters to the elders, for they'll ruin it.'

'There's only one solution. When they start felling, take the whole village and see 'em off. Don't let 'em do it until squire comes to an agreement with the village!' Antek declared firmly.

'They advised the same at Kłab's.'

'Advised! But they won't do it – who'd stand with 'em?'

'The farmers'd go.'

'Not all.'

'If Boryna leads they will.'

'We don't know that Maciej will want to.'

'Antek will, then,' yelled Balcerek vehemently.

They all assented wholeheartedly; Grzela alone objected. Since he got about and read the *Zorza*,⁴ he began to expound learnedly as from a book that no violence should be used, for it would end with the law and do nothing but land them in the clink, and that the village should fetch a lawyer from town who would fix things fairly.

They did not want to listen for long and some scoffed. He was sorely provoked and said:

'You complain your fathers are stupid, but you've not a grosz o' sense yourselves. You're like babes still crawling, repeating whatever others say!'

'Boryna with Jagusia and the lasses!' someone remarked.

Antek, who had wanted to reply to Grzela, fell silent and his eyes flew towards Jagna.

They had come late, after supper, for the old man had long resisted Józka's squawks and Nastka's persuasions. He'd waited for Jagusia to ask, but right after dinner she had declared sharply that she would go for the music, while he'd retorted sharply that he would not take a step outside the house; he'd not gone to the Voyt's, so he'd go nowhere.

Jagna did not ask again, but dug in her heels and would not speak another word. She sniffled in corners, slammed doors, stood outside in the frost and flung herself about the house like an ill wind, the anger pouring from her in a freezing wave. When they sat down to supper, she would not eat and began pulling out the woollen skirts from the chest instead, trying them on and decking herself out.

What was the old man to do? He cursed, jibed, insisted that he would not go, but in the end he even had to apologize roundly and, glad or no, head off to the inn.

He entered, proud and haughty, with barely a greeting for anyone, for there were few of his rank, since the first in the village were at the Voyt's christening, and he did not spy his son, though he looked keenly about the crowd.

Meanwhile, Antek's eyes did not leave Jagusia. She was standing by the bar. The lads streamed over to ask her to dance and she refused, chatting merrily, but furtively casting her eyes over the people there. So lovely did she look today that, though folk were drunk, they gazed at her in admiration. She was more beautiful than anyone. And yet Nastka was there too, tall as a hollyhock in her red dress, and there was Weronka Płoszkówna, plump and rosy-cheeked as a dahlia, there was the Socha girl, still a scrap of a thing, lithe with a little face as sweet as sugar. There were other lovely, full-grown lasses who drew the lads' eyes, like the Balcereks' Marysia, amazingly grown, a wench as white and firm as a turnip and the best dancer in the village – but none of them equalled Jagna, not one. She surpassed them all in beauty, dress, figure and those bright blue eyes, as a rose surpasses a nasturtium or a hollyhock, a dahlia or a poppy; they looked quite shabby beside her, so did she surpass them all and reign over them. She'd dressed as for a wedding: she'd donned an orange skirt with green-and-white stripes; a waistcoat of blue velvet, bordered with gold thread and cut low, halfway down her breast; and on her fine pure white blouse, which frothed copiously at the neck and wrists, she'd strung rows of beads – amber and pearls. Over her hair she wore a blue silk scarf with a pink pattern, and she let the ends flow down her back. The women laid about her with their tongues for this finery, backbiting maliciously. She didn't care one bit; she soon caught sight of Antek and, blushing with joy, like a pool of water at sunset, she turned from the old man, to whom the Jew was saying something before leading him straight to the snug, where he remained.

Indeed, this was what Antek had been waiting for; he soon squeezed through down the side of the room and calmly greeted them, though Józka turned purposely away.

'Have you come for the music or Matgoška's betrothal?'

'The music ...' she replied quietly, emotion almost quelling her voice.

They stood side by side without a word for some time, only breathing faster and glancing furtively into each other's eyes. The dancers had pressed them against the wall. Szymek had whirled Nastka away, Józka had disappeared somewhere. They were left alone.

'Every day I wait, every day ...' he whispered quietly.

'Well, can I get out? ... They're watching me ...' she replied, trembling. Their hands met somehow of their own accord, their hips were pressed together; both were pale and breathless, sparks flashed in their eyes and in their hearts there was a music that could not be expressed.

'Step back a bit, let go!' she begged quietly, for there was a crowd of folk all around.

He did not respond, but took her firmly by the waist, shoved aside the scrum, led her into the circle and shouted to the musicians:

'An *obertas*, lads, and look lively!'

Well, didn't the music crash with such force that the bass viol yelped. They knew him after all, and that when the mood took him, he was ready to stand the whole inn a drink!

All his companions took to the floor after him: Płoszka danced, Balcerek danced, Grzela danced, and others too, while Mateusz, since his ribs would not allow it, tapped his feet and shouted encouragement!

Antek, meanwhile, carousing and inflamed to distraction, took the lead and outdanced them all, breezing past the first pair so spiritedly that he no longer remembered or noticed a thing, for Jaguś pressed against him so sweetly, and begged again and again, barely catching her breath:

‘More, Jantoś! A bit more!’

They danced for an age, pausing only to catch their breath and drink some beer, and still they danced, not marking that people were noticing, whispering and frowning, and making remarks aloud. Antek did not care today as long as he could feel her beside him, could press her close until she tensed and shut those beloved deep-blue eyes, until he thought he would lose his mind! He thrilled with joy and such elation, as though a spring day had bloomed in him. He forgot about the people and everything around. His blood seethed within him, along with a growing power, so proud, so headstrong, that his chest was bursting! And Jaguś too was as if plunged in delight and distraction. He carried her off like a dragon – she didn’t resist; how could she after all, when he was spinning her, lifting her, pressing her close so that at moments everything went dark and she lost sight of all the world, and felt such a thrill of rapture, youth and joy that she could not see a thing, other than those dark brows, those fathomless eyes, those red beguiling lips!

And the sprightly fiddle sawed and wailed, letting fly with the tunes, like the scorching harvest wind that turns the blood to fire and excites the heart with joy and vigour; while the bass viols bleated a prancing beat, so that feet kicked up their heels, carried away of their own accord. Then came the flute, trilling and warbling like a blackbird in spring, flooding you with such delight, so stirring the heart that it gave you the shivers, your head swam, your breath came short, and at the same time you wanted to both cry and laugh, and shout, and caress, and kiss, and fly off somewhere into the great wide world with abandon. And they danced with such passion that the inn shook and the barrels trembled beneath the musicians.

Flashing by in an enormous circle, some fifty couples reeled, singing, from wall to wall, drunk with joy and such verve that flagons tumbled over and lamps went out. The night and jittering darkness engulfed them, the only light coming from the firebrands in the chimney that glowed in the frenzied gale, scattering sparks and belching blood-red flames in which the dense coil of people could just be made out as they whirled in such a thicket that the eye could neither seize nor recognize which was man and which was woman! Capotes flew high like white wings; woollen skirts, ribbons, aprons, burning faces, shining eyes, wild stamping, singing, shouts – everything was jumbled together, spinning round like a single spindle that flew with a mighty roar through the open doorway into the hallway and out into the snowy, frosty winter’s night.

Antek was most boisterous of all. He stamped his heels loudest, charged like a hurricane, ducked to the ground so they thought he’ll fall! But no, he was up already, running and shouting aloud; sometimes he’d call a tune to the musicians and leap across the crowd, sweeping and rampaging through like a storm, much to the alarm of some, and barely any could keep up.

He twisted and turned a good hour like this. Others stopped, exhausted, and even the musicians’ hands faltered, but he tossed them money, urging them to play on, and danced until finally there were only a few of them left in the circle. The womenfolk, of course, were fussing loudly at this carousing, shaking their heads, wagging their tongues and commiserating with Boryna, until Józka, mad at Antek, and even more so at her stepmother, ran to the old man.

‘Father, Antek’s dancing with my stepmother and people are fussing!’ she whispered.

‘Let ‘em dance; what’s an inn for!’ he replied, and turned back to clinking glasses with the gendarme and the blacksmith, beginning to expound on something.

She returned empty-handed, but began to watch them keenly, for after the dance they were standing at the bar with a whole crowd of lads and lasses. They were a merry lot. Ambrozy, now completely drunk, told such tales that the girls hid their faces in their aprons, and the lads burst out laughing and joined in. Antek bought beer for everyone, was the first to drink, pressing the others, embracing and squeezing the lads and pushing sweets by the handful into the girls’ waistcoats so that he could do the same to Jagna, and though exhausted he laughed the loudest, happily chattering away!

It was no less lively in the rest of the inn. Moods had lifted and lightened, so that there was always some pair dancing, while others crowded together in every possible corner, talking, drinking, mingling and making merry to their hearts’ content. The Rzepki gentry had come out from behind their table, befriending the Lipce villagers over a glass of vodka, and some even took to dancing; the girls did not object, since the men were more refined in manner and asked so nicely.

Meanwhile, Antek’s band revelled separately, all being young and the first in the village, and he, though he chatted with everyone, was as though lost to the world today. He cared for nothing now, hid nothing, nor would he have been able to – so he didn’t mark that people roundabout were peering closely and intently pricking up their ears. Ha, as if he cared – he kept whispering in Jagna’s ear, pinning her to the wall, embracing her and taking her hand; he barely refrained from kissing her! His eyes darted about recklessly and such a storm was gathering in his breast, he felt capable of anything, so long as she was there to see, for he saw love and admiration glowing in her blue eyes! So he grew even taller, strutted and boomed like a storm about to break! He drank solidly all the while and pressed Jagusia to also, so that her head was spinning and she hardly knew what was happening to her, except at moments when the music fell silent and the inn quietened slightly and she came to a little and was overwhelmed by fear. She looked round in astonishment as though seeking rescue, she even longed to run away, but he was standing beside her and gazing at her, and such heat radiated from him, such love welmed up in her, that in a second she’d forgotten everything.

This went on for some time, for Antek was now standing drinks for the whole company. The Jew gave willingly and chalked each quart twice on the door.

Since the whole company was befuddled, they all embarked on a dance in a body, to clear their heads a little, with Antek and Jagusia, of course, dancing at their head.

This was the sight that met Boryna as he came out from the snug. The women had fetched him, scandalized; he took one look and soon grasped everything. A terrible anger seized him, but he only gritted his teeth, did up the loops of his capote, pulled on his cap and began to push his way through. Folk parted before him for he was pale as the wall and his eyes shone wildly.

‘Get home!’ he said loudly, when they flew past. He made to grab Jagna’s hand, but in that instant Antek twirled on the spot and carried her off, so that in vain did she try to break free. Boryna leapt forward, broke the circle, dragged her from Antek’s arms, and without letting go or even glancing at his son, he led her out of the inn.

The music stopped abruptly. A sudden silence fell over everyone and they stood as though turned to stone. No one said a word, but they marked that something terrible was about to happen, since Antek hurled himself after his father and Jagna, thrusting apart the crowd as though it were a sheaf of hay and running out of the inn. But as soon as the frost hit him, he stumbled over a tree trunk lying before the house and fell into the snow. He clambered up rapidly, however, and caught up with them at the turn of the road by the pond.

‘Take your own road and do not harass folk!’ the old man shouted, turning to him.

Jagna escaped to the cottage with a yelp and Józka pushed some picket into the old man’s fist and yelled:

‘Hit that ruffian, *Tatula*, hit him!’

‘Let her go, let her go!’ Antek spluttered, completely out of his mind, and edged forward with his fists up, ready to let rip.

‘I’m telling you, be off, for as God’s in heaven, I’ll kill you like a dog! Do you hear?’ the old man shouted again, ready for anything. Antek backed off instinctively, his hands falling to his sides, so terror-stricken that he began to tremble, and the old man went slowly to the house.

He did not leap after him now, but stood, shaken, half-conscious and gazing around vacantly; no one was there, the moon shone bright, the snow glittered and a sombre whiteness lay round about. He’d no grasp of what had happened and only came to a little in the inn, where his friends, who had rushed to his rescue, had brought him, for word had spread that he was fighting with his father.

The festivities were over, everyone had dispersed, for it was late and the inn had promptly emptied and only an occasional snatch of song or hooting resounded somewhere along the lanes. The Rzepki folk alone were left behind as they were staying the night. Pan Jacek was playing them such mournful tunes on the fiddle that they sat at the tables leaning their heads on their hands and sighing. Antek sat in a corner by himself, and as they could not get through to him, and since he would not answer, they all left him to himself. He sat so lifeless and insensible that in vain did the Jew remind him that the inn was closing. He heard nothing, could take in nothing, and was finally roused only by the voice of Hanka, to whom people had reported that he had come to blows with his father again.

‘What do you want?’

‘Come home, it’s late,’ she begged, holding back the tears.

‘You go, I’m not coming! Get away, I tell you!’ he shouted threateningly, and then suddenly, who knows why, he leaned towards her and said right in her face: ‘If they clapped me in chains, locked me in a dungeon, I’d be more free than I am at your side, do you hear, more free!’

Hanka burst into miserable tears and left.

He soon got up too, went out and walked towards the mill.

It was a clear night, brightened by the light of the moon. The trees threw long bluish silvery shadows. The frost had taken so firm a hold that the crack of pickets in the fences could be heard now and again and a quiet poignant whine drifted over the glittering snow. A lifeless ice-bound silence cradled the whole world. The village was sleeping; not a glimmer of light came from any window, not a single dog barked, no rumbling from the mill, nothing – only the hoarse but faint singing, as though in his sleep, of Ambrozy, who was standing in the middle of the road near the inn, as was his custom.

Antek trudged slowly round the pond, pausing and glancing about in a daze, listening out fearfully, for his father’s terrible words were still ringing in his ears; he could still see his enraged eyes, feel them boring into him like a knife. He shrank instinctively, fear catching at his throat, his heart froze, his hair stood on end – and all bitterness vanished from his mind, love vanished, everything vanished. Mortal fear alone remained, shivering dread and a desperate, dismal powerlessness ...

He did not know himself at what point he began to head for home, when in front of the church the sound of painful sobbing and loud lamenting reached him. At the foot of the statue standing at the very gates to the graveyard, someone was lying, stretched out on the snow, obscured by the shadow of the fence. He leaned over, thinking it was some traveller or a drunk – but it was Hanka lying there, pleading for mercy.

‘Come home, Hanuś, it’s freezing, come on!’ he begged, his soul melting strangely, but she did not reply, so he pulled her up and took her home.

They did not speak, for Hanka was crying bitterly.

CHAPTER 8

It was like a tomb at Boryna's after that feast day – no weeping, no shouting, no fulminating, nothing but a heavy hush, skulking ominously and full of suppressed ire and resentment. The whole household fell silent, swathed in gloom and living in constant fear and expectation of something terrible, as though beneath a roof that might collapse upon their heads at any moment.

Neither that day when he came in nor the next did the old man have a bad word for Jaguś, nor did he complain even to Dominikowa; it was as though nothing had happened.

He fell sick, however, from the rancour he harboured deep inside. He could not rise from his bed, for he felt constantly nauseous, had stitches in his side and was sapped by a fever.

'Can be naught but your liver smarting, or your innards collapsed!' declared Dominikowa, rubbing his sides with hot oil. He did not reply, only groaned painfully and stared stubbornly at the ceiling.

'It's not Jagusia who's to blame, no!' she began quietly, so that they would not be heard in the chamber, for she was greatly troubled that he'd said not a word about yesterday's business.

'Who then?' he muttered.

'How's she to blame? You left her alone and went to drink in the snug, the music were playing, everyone dancing – was she meant to stand in the corner like Samson? She's young after all, and healthy, and needs some fun. He forced her so she went and danced. How could she not? Everyone in the inn has the right to ask whoever takes his fancy, and if that one, that ruffian, chose her and wouldn't let her go, then it were only to spite you, out of spite alone!'

'You get rubbing and do whatever, so I can be up and about, and you can stop knocking sense into me. I know full well how it was, I don't need your account.'

'If you're so clever, then you should know that a blooming young woman also needs her pleasures! She's not made o' wood and she's not an old biddy; she married a man and a man's what she needs, not some old grandpa to count her prayer beads with, no!'

'Why did you give her me, then?' he sneered.

'Why? Who was whining for her like a dog? I didn't pester you to take her, I didn't shove her at you, nor did she herself! She could have had any other, the first in the village, so many of them there were ...'

'There were, but not for marriage!'

'May your yapping twist your tongue!'

'The truth's stung like nettles and made you spit!'

'Nasty humbug, it's a lie! Humbug!'

He pulled the quilt up, turned to the wall and said not another word to her heated vindications, until she turned on the tears, then he whispered spitefully:

'When her stick won't do the trick, a woman thinks her crying'll sort it!'

He knew very well what he'd said. It was only now, when he couldn't rise from his bed, that it came to mind what he'd heard tell of Jagna before. He weighed it up, put it together, joined all the pieces, deliberated – and such an anger seized him, such jealousy gnawed at him, that he could not lie still. He tossed on the bed, cursed quietly or turned his face towards the chamber and followed Jagna with his wrathful, hawk's eyes ... She, meanwhile, somewhat pale and gaunt, walked about the house as though in her sleep, glancing at him with the miserable eyes of a wronged child and sighing so that he could not but feel sorry and his heart slowly thawed, though the jealousy too grew all the stronger.

So it went on for close to a week entire, so that it was nigh unbearable in the cottage, for she had a greatly feeling soul after all – like one of those flowers that the cold need only breathe upon and it quickly wilts and shivers in pain. She languished before their very eyes, could not sleep, was off her food, could hardly sit still or take up any task, for everything slipped through her fingers and terror stalked her – how else when the old man simply lay there, groaning, had not a good word and just stared like a bandit. She constantly felt his eyes upon her, constantly, so that she could barely stand it any more. Her life was burdensome to her, for untold longings sapped her too and she'd heard nothing of Antek, he hadn't shown himself all that week, though often at dusk in mortal fear she had peered under the hayrick! She did not dare ask anyone. She was so fed up inside the house, that several times a day she scuttled to her mother's, but Dominikowa was rarely at home – she went visiting the sick, or was sat in church, and if she was in, she directed stern looks and bitter reproaches towards her daughter. The lads too hung about, morose, cross and dejected, for the old woman had thrashed Szymek with the flax break¹ for drinking away four whole zlotys in the inn at Three Kings. Then she'd look in at the neighbours, to get through the day somehow, but it wasn't grand there either, aye, for though they did not see her off, still they sieved their words through gritted teeth, glaring sternly, and everyone alike lamented the old man's illness, complaining mournfully of how nasty the times were becoming!

And Józka, too, would needle her at every turn, whenever she got the chance. Even Witek was too scared to natter in front of the master, so there was no one to exchange a word with. Her only pleasure and distraction was Pietrek playing quietly on the fiddle in the stable of an evening, for the old man would not allow it in the house.

The winter kept on, fierce, icy and windswept, so that you had to stay indoors!

Finally, on Saturday the old man, though not well yet, got up from his bed, dressed snugly, for there was a hard frost, and went into the village.

He looked in at various houses, seemingly to warm himself a little or on a piece of business, and even stopped willingly where he'd passed by before without a word. Everywhere he was first to bring up the inn and made a joke of the whole thing, gladly recounting how mightily drunk he'd been and fallen ill because of it!

There was much surprise, nodding and shaking of heads, but no one let themselves be taken in. They knew his implacable pride all too well, and that once he'd taken offence, you could roast him alive and he'd not emit a sound; it was also known that he always lorded it over others and put on airs and graces, thinking himself better than the rest and taking great care that none should cast aspersions on him.

They also surmised that he was keen to thwart and quench any tittle-tattle that might have arisen.

Even old Szymon, the Soltys, said straight to his face, as was his way:

'Fiddle-faddle, an hour's work in the tree and apples are there but three! People's talk is like you fire – you won't put it out with your bare hands, it has to burn itself out! I'll tell you again what I said before the wedding: when an old man takes a young lass, it'll take more than holy water to fend off the Evil One!'

Boryna was cross at this and went straight back to the house. Jaguś, meanwhile, thinking that since he was up it must all be over and as before, sighed with relief and began to waylay him and glance into his eyes, coaxing and twittering sweetly about the house again ... But he soon brought her back to earth with a word so sharp that she froze; nor did he change afterwards, neither caressed nor coddled, did not try to guess her thoughts or to please her, but shouted as sharply as at a serving lass over the disorder and chivvied her to work.

From that day on he took charge once more, overseeing everything and letting nothing out of his grip. For whole days, as soon as he recovered, he threshed with Pietrek and worked at the wheat in the barn, barely stepping beyond the farmstead. He'd spend the evenings mending harnesses or whittling farm tools in the cottage, and guarded Jaguś so keenly that she could not take a step without him watching; he even locked away her Sunday best and kept the key on his person.

Oh, she suffered, how she suffered! Bad enough that he shouted for any cause and said not a kind word, carrying on as though she were not the woman of the house. He gave Józka his orders as to what needed doing, it was with Józka that he talked various matters over, which the girl did not understand anyway, and Józka he commissioned to keep an eye on everything!

It was as though Jagna were not there. She spent whole days spinning, or would wander aimlessly or flee to her mother's to grumble and complain, though the old woman had no counsel to give, for Boryna had remarked sharply to the latter:

'She were mistress and did as she pleased, lacking for nothing, but since she set no value by it, let her try something else! And I say to you, you can tell her that while I'm still on my pins, I will defend what's mine and not permit mockery of me like some puppet – remember that.'

'For heaven's sake! When she's done nothing wrong!'

'If that were so, I'd not be talking nor acting this way! It's enough that she were hanging about with Antek!'

'In the inn, dancing, in full sight, after all!'

'Ha, only in the inn! Ha!' For he'd divined that when he'd found her apron at the fence she must have been meeting Antek.

So he would not be persuaded, would not believe anything, firmly standing his ground, until finally he said:

'I am a good man, peaceable, everyone knows it, but if someone strikes me with a whip, I'm ready to return it with a staff.'

'Beat the one's who's injured you, but do not wrong someone unjustly, for every wrong breeds revenge.'

'Defending your own is no wrong!'

'May you see in time how far what's yours extends!'

'You're threatening me, I see!'

'I am but saying my piece and you are too quick to trust yourself. Mind only that the pot oft calls the kettle black!'

'Enough of your preaching and proverbs, I've my own mind!' He was angered.

There it ended, for Dominikowa, seeing his obstinacy and intransigence, let the matter be, trusting that it would pass of its own accord and sort itself out. But he did not slacken for a single day, digging in his heels, and even found rancour to his taste. Often in the night on hearing Jagna's weeping, he'd start and make unconsciously to run to her, but checked himself in time, pretending

that he'd risen to look out of the window or make sure the doors had been closed.

So it dragged on for a couple of weeks without pause. Jagna was downcast, sad; everything was so bad that she could hardly bear it any longer, did not dare look anyone in the eye. She was ashamed in front of the whole village, for everyone well knew what was up at Boryna's!

The house was grown so gloomy now, they all moped about quietly, fearfully, like shadows.

True, hardly anyone called by, having disputes aplenty themselves! Nor did the Voyt show his face, cross that Boryna hadn't wanted to be godfather. Only Dominikowa's boys looked in sometimes, Nastka Golebianka would dash in with her distaff, though she came more to see Józka and to meet with Szymek, so she was no distraction, and Rocho too dropped by from time to time, but seeing the glum cross faces he stayed only briefly.

Only the blacksmith came every evening and hung about, souring the old man towards Jagna as best he could and ingratiating himself anew, and indeed Jagustynka often came by too, willingly adding her own ha'pennyworth whenever there was squabbling. Dominikowa also looked in daily, and daily repeated that Jagna should endear herself to the old man with her meekness. What of it? When Jagna could not humble herself, she could not do so for anything. On the contrary, revolt rose in her and resentment gripped her increasingly. Jagustynka greatly furthered her in this, for one day she quietly began:

'Jaguś, I'm cruelly sorry for you as if you were my own! That old dog is doing you wrong, and you suffer like a lamb! Not like other women, no!'

'How is that?' Jagna asked curiously, sick of this state of affairs.

'You'll not overcome anger with kindness, but with greater anger still! He has you down as a slut, and you say nothing; he's shut your clothes up in a chest, watches your every move, has not a good word for you – and what do you do? You sigh, tormenting yourself, and wait about for God's mercy! God helps those who help themselves! If it were me, I'd know what to do! I'd give Józka a slapping – she'd not be giving orders in my house, and you're the mistress here. Nor would I give way to a man in anything! If he wants war, let him have it till he chokes on it! Ha, let a fellow lord it over you and he'll be beating you next and there's no knowing where it will end! And first up,' she said, lowering her voice and whispering in her ear. 'Put him off like a calf from a cow. Don't let him anywhere near you, like a dog at the threshold! You'll soon see how he softens and grows kind!'

Jagna leapt up from her distaff to cover her red face.

'Why so abashed, you silly girl? There's nothing wrong in it. All the women do it and will carry on so, I'm not the first to think it up! It's obvious a skirt'll lead a man further than a dog after bacon, for the dog's more likely to hang back! And an old man's easier than a young 'un. He's greedier and it's harder for him to seek his pleasures in other folk's cottages! Go right ahead, you'll soon be thanking me! And as for the tittle-tattle about you and Antek, don't you take it to heart. You could be pure as the first snowfall and they'd spy some soot! That's the way the world's disposed – if you give in they won't let you even wag your finger, but if you don't give two hoots what they're saying, if you stand firm and proud, you can do whatever you please! You'll not hear a squeak against you and they'll fawn like puppies! The whole world belongs to the strong, to the tough and stubborn! They've talked about me enough, oh yes, and your mother too, it was common knowledge with that Florek ...'

'Don't you mention my mother!'

'Let her stay a saint, then! True, everyone needs a touch o' saintliness.'

She expounded a long time yet, instructing and giving advice, and bit by bit, without being asked, began to recount whatever she could think up about Antek. Jagusia listened avidly, without betraying it, however, by a single word, but she took these counsels much to heart and deliberated over them the whole day long. Then in the evening, when Rocho, the blacksmith and Nastka came, she said to the old man:

'Give me the key to the chest, I must air my clothes.'

He gave it, somewhat abashed, for Nastka had burst out laughing, but all the same, when she'd finished, he stretched out his hand for the key.

'There's only my things in there, so I can mind it myself!' she said firmly.

From that evening the cottage became a living hell. The old man did not change, but nor did she give way. For every word she'd give a whole stack in reply, and so loudly that the shouts could be heard as far as the road. It helped but little, so she began to do everything out of spite.

She picked on Józka at every turn, sometimes scolding her so severely the girl would run off to complain in tears; it helped not at all, for Jagna raised hell all the more, if things did not go her way. In the evening she would deliberately take herself off to the other side of the house, leaving the old man in the first chamber, then she'd compel Pietrek to play, singing along herself to all kinds of songs until late into the night; then again she'd dress up to the nines on Sundays, and without waiting for her husband would set off for church by herself, lingering along the road with the lads.

The old man was astonished at this change. Livid with anger, he tried to resist and to prevent it getting about the village, but he could do nothing about her moods, and gave in ever more frequently for the sake of peace.

'Well I'll be! She seemed such a sheep, meek as a lamb, and now she's kicking over the traces!' he exclaimed to Jagustynka.

'Too well fed and watered!' she retorted, indignant, for she always took the part of whoever sought her counsel. 'But I'll tell you this: while there's time, you want to chase off those moods with something hard, for even a rod won't help you later.'

'That's not the custom with the Borynas!' he said haughtily.

'Seems to me it'll come to it, even at the Borynas,' she whispered spitefully.

A few days or so later, right after Candlemas, Ambrozy reported that the priest would be doing the rounds the next day.²

They busied themselves with preparations first thing, so that even the old man went shovelling snow in the yard to avoid the hell inside, for Jagna was roundly scolding Józka. The chamber was aired, the walls swept of cobwebs, Józka sprinkled the porch and hallway with yellow sand and they dressed hastily in their best, for the priest was not far away in the neighbourhood, at the Balcereks'.

Before long, the priest's sleigh was at the porch. Wearing a surplice over his fur, he was preceded by two of the organists' children, dressed as for Mass. He came inside, said the Latin prayers, sprinkled the holy water and went to the farmstead to bless the buildings and all the livestock. Boryna carried the holy water before him in a dish while the priest prayed aloud and blessed everything in turn; the organist's children walked beside him, meanwhile, singing carols and zealously ringing the bells they carried, while the rest all followed behind as though in procession.

Once finished, he returned to the chamber and sat down to rest, and while Boryna and the farmhand were tipping half a bushel of oats and quarter of a bushel of peas into the sleigh, he began hearing Józka and Witek's prayers.

So ably did they answer that he was exceedingly surprised and asked who'd taught them.

'It were Kuba taught me prayers and catechism, and Rocho the primer!' Witek spoke up boldly, but Józka was so overawed that she just blushed, cried and couldn't get a word out! He gave them two small holy pictures each, charged them to mind their elders, say their prayers and eschew sin, for the Evil One lurked at every corner, enticing folk to hell. Then, raising his voice, he glanced at Jagna and finished forbiddingly:

'I say to you, nothing is hidden from the eye of God's justice, nothing! Beware of Judgement Day and the day of punishment, repent and mend your ways while there is time!'

The children burst into tears, for it seemed to them that they were in church during the sermon. Jagusia's heart beat fearfully too, and her whole face flushed red, for she well understood that he was speaking to her, and when Maciej returned she went straight out, not daring to look the priest in the eye.

'I'd like to talk to you, Maciej!' he whispered. When they were left alone, he told Boryna to sit beside him. Clearing his throat, the priest offered him some snuff, wiped his nose on his handkerchief, from which the scent of the thrivable wafted – as Witek told it afterwards – cracked his fingers and began quietly:

'People have told me what happened in the inn, they have!'

'Aye, in front of everyone it was!' the old man confirmed sadly.

'I am forever enjoining: do not go to the inn and do not take your womenfolk there. I plead, I beg, and to no avail, so there you have it, but thank God heartily that nothing worse came of it, nothing. I tell you!'

'Nothing!' His face brightened, for he trusted the priest.

'They tell me too that you are punishing her harshly for it. That's unjust. He who metes out injustice sins, I tell you, sins!'

'Not at all, I wanted only to curb her a little, but ...'

'Antek's to blame, not her!' the priest interrupted hastily. 'He forced her to dance on purpose, out of spite. He clearly wanted a row, I'm telling you, he wanted a row!' he affirmed solemnly, primed by Dominikowa, on whose words he depended completely. 'What else did I want to say ... aha ... Your filly's wandering about the stable. You must shut her in a stall, or the gelding'll kick her and there's a misfortune ready and waiting. My mare was ruined that way last year! What stallion sired her?'

'The miller's!'

'Ah, I knew straight off by the colour and the patch on her forehead, a fine foal! ... But you need to make peace with Antek without fail – these conflicts are making the lad utterly wayward.'

'I did not seek discord with him, so I shan't be soliciting his peace,' Boryna said stubbornly.

'I'm advising you as your priest, and you can do what your conscience dictates, but I tell you: it's by your doing that a man is going to waste. They were telling me just today that he's forever sitting in the inn, stirring up the lads against their elders, and it seems there's something brewing against the manor.'

'I've been told nothing of the sort.'

'When a plagued sheep slips into the herd, it infects every beast! And this plotting against the manor could end badly for the whole village.'

But Boryna did not wish to discuss the matter, so the priest chatted about other affairs and said finally:

'Peace and harmony, my dears, peace and harmony is the only way.' He took some snuff and put on his hat. 'The whole world depends on accord, peaceably, good-heartedly. Then even the manor would come to an agreement with you. The squire said something of the sort to me – he's a good man and would like to come to a neighbourly arrangement ...'

'A wolf of a neighbour, and for such the stake is best, or iron.'³

The priest bridled and looked into his face, but meeting his grey, cold, unrelenting eyes and obstinate mouth, he turned away hurriedly and could but wring his hands in agitation; he did not like quarrels.

'I must be off. I tell you again, you should not antagonize your wife through excessive severity. She's young, and flighty like every woman, so you must behave justly and cleverly towards her. Turn a blind eye to one thing, a deaf ear to the next and ignore the third, to save yourself strife – that's the source of all that is worst. God always blesses the peacemaker – He does, I tell you! What the devil is that?' he shrieked, leaping up, for the stork, which had been standing motionless by the chest, was pecking with all its might at the priest's shiny shoe.

'Why, a stork. Witek brought it in the autumn when the bird got left behind, nursed it to health for its wing were broken and now it sits in the house and catches mice, like a cat.'

'Well, you don't say. I've never seen a tame stork before – odd, very odd!'

He leaned over, wanting to stroke it, but the stork would not let itself be touched. It twisted its neck and again aimed sideways at the priest's shoes.

'You know, I've taken quite a fancy to him, I'd willingly buy him from you. Will you sell him?'

'No need for selling – the boy'll soon bring him to the presbytery.'

'I'll send Walek for him.'

'He won't let anyone touch him, he listens only to Witek.'

They called the boy. The priest gave him a zloty and ordered him to bring the stork at dusk, when he was back from his rounds, but Witek burst into tears. As soon as the priest had left, he took the stork to the byre and wailed there until evening and the old man had to quieten him with the strap, reminding him to take the bird. Aye, the boy had to obey, though his heart was spluttering with grief and pain. He did not even feel the strap much, but went about stupefied, his eyes swollen with crying, and whenever he could, he fell upon the stork, throwing his arms about it, kissed it and wept convulsively ...

So at dusk, when the priest was back from the village, he covered the stork with his capote to shield it from the frost, and together with Józka, since the bird was heavy, they carried it to the presbytery, both crying bitterly, and Łapa ran after them, barking dolefully too.

As for the old man, the longer he weighed the priest's words and his sincere assurances, the more he brightened, grew calmer and slowly and unobtrusively changed his ways towards Jagusia.

Everything returned to its previous state, but the former joyful hubbub, that inner peace and that quiet deep trust did not return to the house.

It was like a broken pot, which, though patched and seemingly whole, still leaked somewhere and let water through in a place that was unclear, even under the light.

So it was in the cottage, for lingering distrust, slightly faded but still vivid resentments and not wholly stifled suspicions trickled through indiscernible cracks in its harmony.

For despite his sincerest efforts and almost despite himself, the old man could not shed his mistrust and kept a careful watch on Jagna's every move. She, meanwhile, did not forget his temper and harsh words, not for the blink of an eye. Unable to escape those piercing watchful eyes, she seethed all the while with vengeance.

Perhaps it was because he guarded and did not trust her that she hated him even more, and craved Antek ever more powerfully.

She had now so arranged matters that every few days she met him at the hayrick. Witek helped them in this, as he had lost all sympathy for the farmer on account of the stork and clung to Jagna, especially as she now gave him better suppers, more gravy, and a few groszy very often came his way from Antek. But it was Jagustynka who helped them most of all. She knew so well how to sidle into Jagna's good graces and inspire Antek's trust that there simply was no way to see each other without her help. She was their go-between; she guarded them from the old man and shielded them from surprises! And all out of sheer spite towards the whole world! She took revenge on others for her own neglect and grievances; she could bear neither Jagna nor Antek, and the old man even less, the same as any rich man in the village after all, for having everything, while she had not even a corner to lay her head and get a mouthful of something hot! The poor she despised equally and mocked them even more.

The devil's very bedfellow or worse, so they said of her.

'They'll be at each other's throats and scrapping like rabid dogs,' she often thought, well pleased at her handiwork. Since in winter there was little to do, she'd traipse from cottage to cottage with her distaff, eavesdropping, inciting one lot against another, deriding everyone equally. They didn't dare close their doors to her, fearing her tongue and mainly because it was said she had the evil eye ... She looked in at Antek's too, but she'd run into him most often coming back from work, and then she'd put news of Jagna his way.

A fortnight or so after the priest's visit to Boryna's, she nabbed him by the pond.

'You know, the old man took a stand against you to the priest.'

'What was he yapping about now?' he asked carelessly.

'That you're inciting people against the manor, that you should be handed over to the gendarmes, and more besides ...'

'Let him try! I'd set his roof blazing so as there'd not be a stone left standing by the time they got to me!' he cried passionately.

She flew off with this news to the old man. He thought hard and said quietly:

'That's just like him, that ruffian, just like him.'

He said nothing more, he wasn't about to start swapping intimacies with a woman, but when Rocho came that evening, he confided in him.

'Don't believe everything Jagustynka reports, the woman's wicked!' replied Rocho.

'Maybe it's not true, but there've been similar incidents. Old Pryczek, for one, burned down his brother-in-law's house, for cheating him over the land division. He went to jail for it, but he'd burnt it down. Antek could do the same – he must have hinted something. She wouldn't have made it up completely.'

And Rocho, being a good man, was greatly distressed at this and began to coax him:

'Make peace, give him some land – he has to live too. He'll settle down more quickly and won't have cause for quarrelling and threats ...'

'No, I don't care if I go to ruin and if I'm driven to begging, I'll go, but while I'm living I'll not hand over a single field! Bad enough he struck and abused me like a dog, I'd let that pass, though it's hard and don't come easy – but if he's planning something else!'

'You cannot take some old gossip's words to heart!'

'Aye, it may not be true, aye ... but that it could happen ... makes me lose my mind and my blood run cold ... just to think it could happen ...'

Boryna clenched his fists and froze with horror at the mere thought of such a thing. He had no proof of it, had never thought of it, was even sure, deep down, of Jagusia's innocence, but he felt that in his son's hatred there had to be something more than anger and resentment over land. The frenzy he'd seen then in his eyes was surely rooted in some other source; he sensed it keenly and in that moment he felt in his own gut that same cold hatred, vengeful and merciless. He turned to Rocho and said quietly:

'Łipce is too small for the both of us!'

'What are you thinking of, what?' the other cried in alarm.

'God help him if I ever catch him at it ...'

Rocho tried to pacify and reason with him, but accomplished nothing.

'He'll burn me down, you'll see!'

From that moment, he knew no rest. Every evening at dusk he'd patrol unobtrusively, lurking at the quoins, circling the house and outbuildings, looking under the thatch, and in the night he would often wake and listen out whole hours at a time, springing from his bed at the slightest creak and checking every corner with his dog. Once he remarked a trampled patch under the hayrick, its traces half swept away. Later, he spied tracks by the stile, which deepened his certainty even more that it was Antek coming at night and ascertaining the wherewithal to start a fire; nothing else as yet came to mind.

He bought a mighty savage dog from the miller and made him a kennel by the shed, provoked him constantly, starved and goaded him. At night the dog ran wild, barking like a mad beast, and threw itself at everyone, so that many people were bitten, until some even brought charges.

But intent on this vigilance and taking such precautions, the old man became so haggard and thin that his belt fell halfway down his hips. His face darkened, he grew hunched, dragged his feet and was wizened as wood shavings from these hidden ruminations and agitation; only his eyes blazed as in a fever. And since he let no one close and had no one to confide in or complain to, those flames scorched and burned him all the more.

Nor did anyone guess what was lodged deep inside, eating away at him.

That he minded his livestock more carefully, had bought a vicious dog and kept vigil through the nights was understandable, as wolves had bred astonishingly that winter and rarely a night passed without packs gathering near the village; sometimes you could hear their howling and they often dug their way under and into byres and snatched a creature here and there. What's more, as always at the threshold of spring, rumours of robbers spread ever more frequently; it was said they'd taken a couple of mares from a peasant at Debica, a hog from Rudki and then a cow from somewhere else – and not a sign left behind, like a stone in the water! Many a villager in Łipce scratched their head, fixed their locks and guarded their stables, since they had the best horses thereabouts.

And so the time went slowly and steadily by, like the hours on a clock, to be neither hurried nor held back!

The winter was severe as ever but had rarely been so changeable; even the oldest could not remember such frosts. First, great snows would fall, then came whole weeks of thaw, so that water stood in the ditches and the fields showed black here and there, and then such blizzards and snowstorms that the world vanished from sight. Then once again came peaceful quiet days, and the sun so warm that the lanes swarmed with children, doors were flung open, people brimmed with joy and the old leaned against the walls, warming themselves.

In Łipce, meanwhile, things followed their age-old order. Those for whom death had been ordained by fate died; those marked for joy celebrated; those who were apportioned poverty complained; if sickness, they made their confession and waited for the end. And so they trudged on somehow with God's help, from day to day, from week to week, hanging on for spring or for whatever had been predestined.

Meanwhile, every Sunday there was music in the inn, carousing, drinking, sometimes bickering, sometimes scrapping, so that afterwards the priest would scold them from the pulpit. And there were other goings-on. The Kłab girl's wedding took place; three days they revelled, and so riotously, it was said, that Kłab had to borrow fifty roubles from the organist for it. Then the Soltys held a decent betrothal for his daughter and Płoszka. And another christening, but these were rare; it was not the time as yet, for many women were not due until spring.

Old Pryczek died at this time too; he'd ailed barely a week, and the poor old thing was scarcely four-and-sixty – the whole village went to the funeral, for his children had laid on a fine wake ...

Wherever they gathered in the evenings to spin, so many lads and lasses appeared that laughter, fun and glee abounded – it was a pleasure to see, and Mateusz, completely recovered, commanded the youth and horsed around most of all.

As for the constant rumours, slanders, run-ins, quarrels, neighbourly strife and gossip – the village fairly heaved with them. Sometimes a beggar who'd knocked about the world would turn up and tell all manner of tales, hanging about the village for weeks at a time. Or sometimes a letter would come from someone's boy in the army, and what reading there would be, what consulting, recounting, girls sighing and mothers weeping, plenty enough for weeks on end!

And what other doings! Magda had gone into service at the inn; Boryna's dog had bitten Walek's boy and they were threatening to go to the law; Jędrzej's cow had choked on a potato and Ambrozy had to slaughter it; Grzela had borrowed a hundred and fifty roubles from the miller and had given a meadow as surety; the blacksmith had bought a pair of horses, a source of much wonder and speculation; the priest had been sick a whole week, and the priest from Tymów had to come and stand in. And there was talk of robbers; the women blabbered of all kinds of phantoms, and there were frequent tales of wolves, which had apparently strangled a sheep at the manor, and of farming business, and the world and folk and all manner of things too numerous to recall and tell! And always something new, more than enough for the days and long evenings both, since in winter no one was short of time.

At Boryna's, too, they amused themselves thus, with this one change: the old man would not budge from the house and did not attend the fun elsewhere, nor would he permit his womenfolk to do so. Jagna was almost in despair and Józka muttered with resentment for days on end, for it was odd and tedious to be stuck at the cottage all day. The only consolation being that he did not forbid Jagna to go out with her distaff, but only to those houses where old women gathered.

So in the evenings, too, they generally sat at home.

One evening, some time towards the end of February, a few people had gathered and were sitting in the other half of the house. Dominikowa was weaving linen by lamplight, and the rest, given the fierce cold, were gathered round the hearth. Jagusia and Nastka were spinning until their spindles hummed, the supper was being prepared, Józka was bustling about the chamber and the old man was puffing his pipe at the fireside and thinking on something deeply, for he barely spoke a word. This quiet was wearisome for all; except for the fire crackling, a cricket chirping in the corner and the loom thumping from time to time, no one said a thing, so Nastka began first.

'Will you come with your distaff to the Kłabs' tomorrow?'

'Marysia invited us today.'

'Rocho promised he'd be reading from the stories about the kings.'

'I'd like to, but I don't know yet ...' Jagna looked questioningly at the old man.

'I want to as well, then, *Tatulu*,' Józka begged.

He did not reply, as the dog was barking loudly on the threshold and in slipped Jasiek shyly. The one they mockingly called Contrary.

'Close the door, nitwit, it's not a bye!' yelled Dominikowa.

'Don't be frightened, none'll eat you – what are you staring at?' asked Jagna.

'Cause ... the stork must be hiding and it's bound to peck me ...' he stammered, casting terrified glances into the corners.

'Oho, the master gave the stork to the priest. He'll not do anything to you now!' muttered Witek.

'Well, I never knew what you kept him for anyhow. All he did was go for people!'

'Sit down, stop your moaning!' ordered Nastka, pointing to a place beside her.

'Ha, who did he ever hurt? Only fools or other people's dogs! He strutted about like he were lord o' the manor, caught mice, kept out of everyone's way, and they give him away!' whispered the boy accusingly.

'Quiet, quiet, you'll tame another come spring if you're that sorry for storks!'

'I will not tame another, for that 'un'll still be mine. Let it just get warmer, I'll think up something to make him get sick of the presbytery and fly back!'

Jasiek was determined to find out what this could be, but Witek only growled:

'Stupid! Go feel up some chickens for eggs. Thinks he'll come up with something better. Anyone with half a mind will find a way without recourse to anyone else!'

Nastka shouted him down, defending Jasiek, whose part she always took; aye, he was a daft 'un, the village made fun of him, the duffer, but he was an only son on ten morgen, so the girl calculated, whereas Szymek had but five and there was no knowing if Dominikowa would let him marry. So she hitched the boy to her cause, so that he was forever hanging about her, and she kept him in reserve, just in case.

He sat by her now, looking into her eyes and wondering what to say, when the Voyt entered, since he'd made his peace with the old man now, and he called right from the threshold:

'I've brought a bit o' news. You're to come to court tomorrow at midday.'

'The *powiat* court, over the cow?'

'I have it right here, about the cow against the manor!'

'I'll have to be out early, it's a good way to the *powiat*. Witek, get off to Pietrek and prepare what's needed, and you'll come as a witness. Has Bartek been notified?'

'I've been to the court offices today and brought summonses for everyone. A whole lot of you'll be going, but the manor's guilty, so let them pay.'

'Like they're not guilty, such a cow!'

'Come over to the other side of the house – I need to talk to you!' whispered the Voyt.

They went and sat so long that Józka served their supper there.

The Voyt urged him, not for the first time, to join them, not to break with the manor, to defer his matter and wait, not go with Kłab and the others, and so on. The old man had hesitated until then, deliberating and not refusing, but leaning neither to one side nor the other, for he was deeply angered that the squire had not sent for him from the blacksmith's that time for the meeting.

The Voyt, meanwhile, seeing he was getting nowhere, finally said in enticement:

'You know how the miller and the smith and me have come to an agreement with the manor, that the three of us will transport wood to the sawmill and planks to town.'

'I do, aye. Others have cursed you plenty that you won't let anyone else make some money.'

'Much I care for their mouthing, waste of time. It's this I want to tell you, what we three have settled – just listen to what I've got to say.'

The old man only shot him a look and wondered what ruse this might be.

'We've resolved to let you in on our partnership! Cart as much as we do! You've good draught horses, farmhands idle, and there's sure gains, they pay by the stere. You'll earn a hundred roubles easy as anything before work starts in the fields.'

'When do you start carting?' he asked after lengthy reflection.

'Can be soon as tomorrow! They're already felling at the nearside clearings, the roads aren't bad. You can do plenty of loads while sleighs can pass. My farmhand's going Thursday.'

'Dammit, if I knew how this case with the cow will go.'

'You just join with us and it will turn out fine. I, the Voyt, am telling you ...'

The old man deliberated long, peering keenly at the Voyt, chalking something on the bench, scratching his head, until finally he said:

'All right, I'll cart and come in with you.'

'Well, then, drop in at the miller's after court tomorrow, and we'll talk some more. I must run now, for the blacksmith's fixing my sleigh runners.'

He left mightily gleeful, thinking that he'd bought the old man with this cartage and got him on side.

Aye, the miller could afford to placate the manor, his land was not on the village register⁴ and the wood was nothing to him; the Voyt too occupied church lands,⁵ and the blacksmith the same, but not he, Boryna! He reckoned to himself that cartage was as cartage did, the wood was a separate matter; plenty of water might flow under the bridge before it came to agreement or strife with the squire ... What would it cost him to nod to the others, play stupid, side with them, when he was not giving anything of his own away, and meanwhile it would be good to earn a few dozen roubles; the horses had in any case to be kept and the farmhand paid! He laughed to himself, rubbed his hands and muttered, pleased:

'Stupid as rams, the buggers: they think they've led me out on the field like a calf, the fools!'

He returned to the women, greatly elated.

'Where's Jagusia?'

'Gone to feed the pigs!' Nastka explained.

He chattered merrily, joked with Jasiek and with Dominikowa, but waited with growing restlessness for his wife, for she seemed to be taking a long time. Giving nothing away, he went out into the yard. The boys in the barn were getting the sleigh ready for tomorrow's journey, for the wagon-bed baskets had to be fixed to the runners and fastened.

He checked over the sleigh, chatting with the boys, looked in on the horses, looked in on the pigs and into the byre – Jagna was nowhere to be seen. He paused under the eaves in the shadows a little and waited. It was a dark night, a cold wind was rising and murmuring, flocks of great heavy clouds chased across the sky, snowflakes fell from time to time.

In a prayer or maybe two, a shadow on the path from the stile – the old man slipped out quickly, leapt forwards and whispered in fury:

'Where've you been, eh?'

But Jagna, though startled for a moment, replied mockingly:

'Take a look, the wind'll easy lead you by the nose,' and went off to the house.

He made nothing of it inside, but when they were getting ready for bed, he said kindly and altogether mildly, without raising his eyes to Jagna:

'Do you want to run off to the Kłabs' tomorrow?'

'If you've no objection we'll go, Józka and me.'

'I won't stop you if you want to ... but I'm off to court, the house will be left to God's Providence, it would be better if you stayed ...'

'Won't you be back by dusk?'

'I think probably only late at night ... it looks like snow, it's a long way, I cannot hurry ... but go if you insist, I don't forbid it ...'

CHAPTER 9

A snowstorm had been in the offing since early morning. The day rose cloudy, windy and thoroughly peevish. A fine snow was falling, dry and sharp as barely ground groats, while an ever-stronger wind was rising, booming loudly and circling with unexpected swoops, so that it staggered like a drunk from side to side, whining, whistling and sweeping the snows impetuously.

Despite the weather, first thing that afternoon Hanka and old Bylica, together with a few hired hands, set off to the forest for dry wood.

Outside it was unspeakably unpleasant; the wind pounded the fields, tossing the trees. It clattered through the village, snatching up snow clouds constantly, spinning them with a wild whistling and shaking them out over the world like shawls full of white and prickly shives, so that everything melted into a roiling whishing blur.

Immediately beyond the village, they went in single file along the windblown baulks towards the still-distant forest, the tips of its trees barely visible through the snowstorm.

The wind was growing in strength. It buffeted from every side, dancing, whirling and tearing at them so that they could barely stay on their feet. They stooped even closer to the ground, and the wind assailed them from the front, flinging dry snow mixed with grit into their burning faces, until they had to shield their eyes.

They walked in silence, as the wind choked and snatched all words away. Groaning a little, they rubbed their hands with snow, for the piercing cold went right through their meagre clothing.

Drifts were forming around the stone heaps, and they had to struggle around the trees and dykes obstructing their way and adding to the distance. Hanka went ahead, glancing back frequently at her father: hunched over, head wound in an apron and wearing Antek's old sheepskin, belted with a straw rope, he trailed along at the end, barely moving in the wind, which constantly stopped his breath, making him pause every few steps to gasp and wipe the tears from his smarting eyes. He'd scuffle forwards hurriedly, groaning quietly:

'I'm coming, Hanuś, coming ... Don't worry, I won't get left behind!'

Aye, he would rather have stayed beside the stove, he would, but could he dare, when the poor girl was venturing out! And inside the house the children were shuddering, it was so unbearably cold. No hot food left, no means to prepare it, so they ate dry bread ... and here the cold wind picked over your bones with its icy fingers ... he thought to himself as he scurried after them.

True, when necessity gets a hold on you, there is no slipping out of its grasp, my friend, oh no!

Gritting her teeth, Hanusia joined the other hired hands to gather wood. So it had come to this, joining forces with these, Filipka, Krakalina, old Kobusowa and Magda Kozioł, the poorest wretches.

She sighed heavily, her teeth chattering, and on she went, and not for the first time, oh no ...

'So be it! So be it!' she whispered firmly, garnering her strength and patience.

If needs must, she would gather the wood, hoisting it on to her back, side by side with the other paupers like Filipka. She wouldn't cry, she wouldn't complain, nor would she run looking for help.

Where could she go anyway? Happen folk'd give, but not much more than a pitying word; it were a wonder it didn't make your heart bleed ... The Lord Jesus was trying her, sending her crosses to bear, so maybe he would reward her too some day ... Ah, so be it, she'd endure the whole lot, wouldn't let herself and the children be ruined and would not spare her hands. She wouldn't let herself be an object of pity or derision!

She had suffered so much these last days that each and every bone in her body shook and ached from the pain of it – how she'd suffered!

It was not the poverty or the neglect, the frequent hunger, so that there was barely enough for the children. Nor was it that Antek sat drinking in the inn with his chums, caring nothing for home, sneaking into the cottage like a stray dog and reaching for his stick at any hint of reproach. That happened all too often in other places as well, you could overlook it; for indeed, an evil hour had come upon him such that you could but wait patiently – it might still pass. But his betrayal she could not forget, withstand or forgive!

No, she couldn't do it. What, with a wife and children, and he forgets everything for that other one! It seemed to pinch her heart with burning tongs, to gnaw right through her, and the scorching unrelenting memory of it swelled inside.

'He's chasing Jagna, it's her he loves, it's all because of her!'

It seemed to her that the Evil One was walking beside her, whispering these terrible reminders in her ear. There was no escaping or forgetting them, never! The pain of the soul's betrayal, the humiliation, the shame, the jealousy, vengefulness and all these ghouls of misfortune each thrust their barbs into her heart and tore at her so that she all but cried out at the top of her voice or beat her head against a wall!

'Lord have mercy, Jesus spare me!' she moaned inside, raising her reddened, now always tear-filled eyes.

She began to quicken her pace, for it was blowing so hard on the hillside leading to the forest that she couldn't stand the cold. Meanwhile, the other women had lagged behind a little and were going slowly. They looked like red roots, barely visible in the snowstorm. The forest was very close now; when the snowy billows subsided for a moment, it loomed suddenly out of the whiteness – a great black wall of dense trunks with silent, icy depths darkening in between.

'Faster! You can rest in the woods!' she exhorted impatiently.

But the women were in no hurry. They rested often, squatting in the snow, their backs to the wind like a covey of partridges, talking quietly. Filipka muttered grudgingly in response:

'Hanka chases like a dog after a crow and thinks she'll catch something quicker ...'

'That she's come so low, poor thing,' Krakalina whispered in sympathy.

'She had it plenty warm at Boryna's house, ate fat, had her fill o' good things. She can try a little misery now. A body can spend nigh on their whole life near dying of hunger, working like an ox, and no one has a drop o' pity.'

'And she never so much as greeted us before ...'

'Well m'dear, bread gives you horns, and hunger feet, they do say.'

'Once when I were after borrowing a scutcher, she said hers were for her use alone.'

'True, open-handed she were not – high and mighty, like all the Borynas – but it's a shame for the woman, a shame!'

'Fair enough, but that Antek's a scoundrel, eh!'

'Aye, he is that. But it's well known if the bitch don't want it, the dog don't get it. Every lad comes running when a bit o' skirt lures him.'

'If it were me, I'd have boxed that Jagna's ears for all to see, let her have a mouthful, cursed her and given her a hairdo she'd never forget.'

'It'll come to that yet, if it don't end even worse!'

'That's the Pacześ spawn for you. Dominikowa weren't no different, no.'

'Come on – wind's low, it might stop by nightfall.'

They reached the wood at last and spread out, but close enough to call each other easily when it was time to return.

The gloom enveloped everyone, swallowing them up, so that barely a trace of them could be seen.

It was an old wood, huge and towering. Fir stood beside fir in an innumerable throng, a teeming thicket, and each so slender, straight and mighty, it looked like a giant pillar of weathered copper, looming through the gloom of grey-green vaults in impenetrable ranks. A sombre, icy glow rose from the snows below, while above, through the fringed branches, as though through holes in thatch, broke the hazy-white sky.

With the gale churning overhead, below it was sometimes almost silent as in church when the organ suddenly ceases and the singing stops and only the murmur of lingering sighs is left, of footsteps, the fading echo of prayers and those hidden, dying notes. The forest then became motionless, mute, as though listening, rapt, to that crashing tumult, that wild cry of the ravaged fields, coming somewhere from afar and carried high and wide, so that only a plaintive trill could be heard, trembling, through the trees.

Suddenly, however, the gale struck the wood with all its might. It dashed its fangs against trunks, it bellowed in the murky depths, wrestled with giants, but in vain. It could not prevail and sank back, strength spent, dying away with a whine in the thick scrub. And the forest did not flinch, not a branch shook, not a trunk swayed; the silence was even deeper and more alarming, and only an occasional bird flapped its wings through the shadows.

At times the gale again descended suddenly, unexpectedly and powerfully like a hungry hawk swooping down. It hammered with its wings, tearing at the treetops, crushing and smashing everything with a maddened roar, so that the wood jittered like something roused from sleep, shaking off its torpor and swaying from end to end. The trees rocked, issuing a menacing smothered grumbling, and suddenly the forest straightened, lifted, seemed almost to step forward, stooping heavily and with a terrible cry, striking out like a giant blinded by rage and vengefulness. A rousing din and fray waxed within the forest. Terror fell upon all creatures as they crouched in the undergrowth, and birds crazy with fear foundered wildly amid the snows that poured in stormy streams between the battered branches and treetops.

But then came long, almost lifeless silences, in which distant heavy thuds could be clearly heard.

'They're chopping down the trees at Wolf's Hollow, they're coming down thick and fast,' whispered the old man, listening to the dull shudders above the ground.

'Stop dawdling, we cannot be hanging about till nightfall.'

They'd tunnelled into a tall young coppice, in such a thicket of tangled and tight-knit branches that they could barely squeeze through. The silence of the grave surrounded them; no voice could break through there. Even the light struggled to filter through the thick cover of snow, suspended on the treetops like a roof. An earthy ashen greyness filled the depths; there was almost no snow on the ground, which was strewn with long-fallen brushwood, up to the knees in places. Here and there, patches of moss showed green, or yellowed berry bushes would appear or a dried-up roadstool hiding from the winter.

Hanka broke off the thicker branches with a crook. She cut them to an equal size, stacking them on a spread-out sheet, and worked with such gusto that she grew warm and threw off her shawl. In an hour or so she had gathered such a load of sticks she could barely hoist them. The old man too had made himself a sizeable bunch, tied it with string and dragged it along, looking for a stump so that he could prop and tie it more easily on to his back.

They hallooed for the women, but in the forest a gale was raging once again and they could not rally them.

'Hanus, we'd best make for the poplar road – it'll be easier than across the fields.'

'Come on then, stay close to me and don't lag behind.'

They turned sharp left, across a stretch of old oak forest, but it was hard going. The snow came to their knees, or the drifts formed ridges in places, for the trees stood sparse and leafless, but for a few trembling greybeards among the mighty branching boughs. Here and there a young oak swished its rusty curls to the ground. The wind blew with all its might, raising so much snow it was almost impossible to walk. The old man soon grew tired and stopped. Hanka's strength was ebbing too, but she just leaned her load against a tree, her frightened eyes seeking a better path.

'We shan't get through here, and it's boggy beyond the oaks. Let's turn back to the fields.'

Somehow, they circled back into the great, dense pine forest where it was somewhat quieter and the snow was piled less high, and soon they came out on to the fields – but there were such flurries that they couldn't make out a thing, even a mere flick of a stone away, nothing, only a white, swirling, rolling darkness. The gale, meanwhile, kept bearing down on the forest, rebounding as though against a wall, tumbling across the fields. It got up again, undaunted, swept up whole piles of snow and hurled them like white clouds at the trees, until a moan rippled through the forest. The gale jostled, spun and lashed so hard that scarcely had they stepped out into the fields when it threw the old man to the ground, and she had to drag him along, though barely able to keep her own balance.

They returned to the wood and, crouching by the trunks, deliberated which direction to take, for there was no knowing now which way to turn.

'Along that path to the left, surely we'll come out by the cross on the poplar road.'

'I can't see that path at all.'

He explained at length, for she feared a wrong turn.

'You can tell, then, which way to take?'

'To the left, seems to me.'

They toiled along the edge of the forest, sheltering a little from the onslaught of the gale.

'Faster, night's coming.'

'I'll just catch my breath and I'm on my way, Hanus, on my way ...'

Aye, it was not easy to pick their way through. The path was completely snowed over, and what's more the gale kept battering from the fields to one side and hurling squalls of snow. In vain did they shelter behind the trees, or hunker like hares under the junipers. Everywhere it pierced to the bone, but crossing deeper into the forest was terrifying – the trees rustled so wildly, the whole wood rocked and almost swept the ground with its boughs, the branches whipped their faces, or firs sometimes fell with such a crash that it seemed the entire forest would collapse in devastation. They hurried as fast as strength and breath allowed to reach the road before nightfall, which could descend at any moment, for it was growing grey already and dark plumes were beginning to wind like smoke across the fields through the tangle of snow.

Finding the road at last, they fell down at the cross, almost dead with fatigue. It stood at the edge of the wood, right by the road, defended from storms by four enormous white-robed birches, their branches hanging down like plaits; a crucified tin Christ hung on a black tree, painted in colours that made him seem alive. The wind had clearly yanked at him, for he hung by one hand only, crashing against the wood and creaking with a rusty voice, as though begging for mercy and deliverance. Tossed by the wind, the birches kept covering him as they shivered and arched, and clouds of snow enveloped him in a shroud of mist, through which Jesus' livid body glimmered and his pale, bloodied face emerged time and again from the whiteness, until it fair froze the heart.

The old man gazed with terror, crossing himself but not daring to speak, for Hanka's face was stern, grim, unfathomable as the night that was now advancing through the world, skulking through the gales and flurries of snow.

Hanka seemed to see nothing, take heed of nothing. She sat sunk in gloomy thoughts and always of the same thing: Antek's betrayal. A storm was gathering in her, full of bloodied sighs, like Jesus' body on the cross, full of frozen yet burning tears, full of intense voices imbued with pain.

'He's no shame, no fear of God – it's like he's coupling with his own mother! Jesus! Jesus!'

Horror snatched her up like a hurricane, she shook with terror and then surged with rage, savage and vengeful as the forest that had suddenly bent and hurled itself, infuriated, at the gale.

'Come quickly, come on!' she called, heaving on her burden. Bent under the weight and without looking round at the old man, she stepped into the road, driven by indefatigable, dogged anger.

'I'll pay you back for everything, I will!' she howled savagely, like the raucous naked poplars grappling with the gale.

'Enough o' this; even a stone would've shattered by now, with such a worm drilling into it! Antek can go to ruin if that's what he wants, let him sit in the inn, but I'll not forgive the wrongs done me, no – I'll pay her back for every one of 'em! If I have to rot in jail, then so be it, but there'd be no justice in the world for a piece like her to walk blithely by upon this holy earth ...' she mused grimly, but her anger slowly ebbed and faded, like flowers in the frost, for her strength began to drain away. Her burden was crushing her; the knags dug into her shoulders and, despite her apron and kaftan, they dented the very flesh. Her arms ached terribly, while the sheet's knot, fixed round a stick, cut into her throat and choked her, and she walked ever more slowly and heavily.

The road was deep under drifts of snow and exposed to the blasting wind, so that the poplars swaying in an endless row on either side were barely visible in the storm and rustled despairingly like birds caught in snares, beating their wings blindly and screeching. The gale seemed to be losing its force at last, quietening overhead, but down in the fields, meanwhile, it rolled about even more ferociously, on both sides of the road. On the plains, in the grey and misty distances, the blizzard went on surging. A thousand eddies whirled in a devilish dance; a thousand billows of cloud sprang from the ground, spinning and swelling, like enormous whirling white spindles; a thousand bundles of enormous tangled stooks shifted across the fields' dykes, moving and churning, growing visibly, rising upwards, until it seemed they'd touch the sky, obscuring everything, whistling as they ruptured in the uproar. The whole ground was like a cauldron of seething whiteness, bubbling over and brimming with icy lees and vapours. From every side, a thousand voices accompanied the arrival of the night. They rose from the ground, hissed overhead, thundered everywhere, whistling like whips that lashed all around. Or strange music trembled above the ground, or again the woods resounded like the organ during the Elevation, or long, piteous cries rent the air, like the calling of lost birds, or dismal whining and sobbing, then cackling, or the sharp dry swish of the poplars swaying in the cloudy, white snow flurries, like terrible phantoms stretching their arms up to the sky.

You could not see even a step ahead, so that Hanka had almost to feel her way from poplar to poplar, resting often and listening, terrified, to those voices.

A hare crouched under a poplar, a black shape that plunged into the blizzard at the sight of her, as though he had been plucked up in its icy claws, so that his pained cry carried through the snowstorm. She peered after the hare with pity, for she could not move now, bent lower than ever. She could hardly pull her feet out of the snow, so crushed was she under her load that it seemed to her at moments that she was hoisting the whole world on her back – the winter, the snows, the gales – and that she'd been walking like this for ever, deadly tired, barely alive with weariness, with her bloodstained, endlessly saddened soul, and that she would wander like this for ever, to the end of the world. The road stretched on interminably, it seemed to have no end. Her burden crushed her so that she leaned against the trees more often and for longer. She sat gloomily, half conscious, and cooled her burning face with snow, rubbing her eyes and rousing herself as best she could, but still seemed to keep falling to the very bottom of that strident savage chaos of the elements. She could only weep miserably, the tears streaming of their own accord, gushing from the deepest hidden human misery, from the very bottom of a heart torn apart, from the groans of those who perish without hope of rescue. Sometimes, though seldom, as her mind had gone quite blank, she would pray, whispering plaintively, twittering broken words to herself like a tiny frozen bird that fitfully flaps its wings, but since it has no strength only cowers, huddles, piping feebly, and soon falls into an ever-deeper drowsiness! Suddenly she started and sprang up, alarmed, for it seemed to her that she could hear crying and children's voices, as though her Pietrus were calling!

And again she hurried as fast as she could, tripping over banks of snow and floundering in the drifts, as though spurred on by the fear that had risen in her suddenly for her children, so that she felt neither tiredness nor the cold.

Then she heard the sound of ringing on the wind, the clang of a whippetree and human voices, but so fragmented that, though she stopped to listen, she could not make out any words; someone was driving behind her, coming closer, and horses' heads loomed out of the snowstorm.

'Father's!' she whispered, making out the white patch on the filly's forehead, and she hurried on, not waiting.

She was not mistaken. Boryna was returning from court with Wittek and Ambrozy. They were driving slowly, since it was almost impossible to burrow through the drifts, and in the worst places they even had to lead the horses by their bridles. They were evidently not at their most sober, for they were bantering and joking loudly and Ambrozy hummed along in that way of his, in spite of the blizzard.

Hanka stepped to the side of the road, pulling her shawl further down over her face, but even so the old man recognized her at first glance as they passed and dealt the whip to each horse to drive by faster. The nags leapt forwards and were soon floundering in a new drift. Then he turned round and pulled up the horses, and when she emerged from the snow flurry and drew even with the sled, he said:

'Pile the wood into the basket, get in, I'll give you a lift.'

So accustomed was she to her father-in-law's orders that she didn't hesitate.

'Bartek took Bylica. He were sitting under a tree weeping. They're right behind.'

She didn't reply. Gazing gloomily into the confusion of night and storming snow that was raging all about, she sat hunched on the front seat, shivering with tiredness and not yet able to gather her thoughts. The old man looked at her long and carefully. She'd grown so gaunt it was pitiful to see her thin face, livid and frostbitten. Her eyes were swollen with crying, and her lips painfully set. She was trembling all over with exhaustion and cold, drawing the torn old shawl about her in vain.

'You should take care. It's easy to get sick in such a state ...'

'And who'll do the work for me?' she whispered quietly.

'It's no time to be setting out for the forest!'

'We ran out o' firewood, I couldn't cook ...'

'The boys are well?'

'Pietruś was ill a few weeks, but he's that much better he'd like to eat twice, three times as much,' she replied doughtily, shaking off her torpor. She drew back the shawl from her face and looked him straight in the eye without any of her former diffidence or frightened meekness. The old man, meanwhile, kept talking and asking, and wondering greatly at the change in her, for he could not detect the old Hanka. A strange, icy composure emanated from her and a hard, stubborn firmness could be seen in her determined mouth. He did not alarm her as before; she spoke as with an equal, a stranger, of various matters without a word of complaint, without reproach ... She replied directly, and to the point, but with a strangely grim voice, which had endured much and was as though hardened into a hoarse lump of hidden woes. Only in the blue eyes worn with weeping smouldered the keen embers of a deeply feeling soul.

'You've changed, I see.'

'Poverty forges a person easier than the blacksmith's iron.'

He was taken aback at the answer, not knowing what to say, so he turned to Ambrozy to talk about the lawsuit with the manor which, despite the Voyt's assurances, he had lost, and been forced to pay the costs to boot.

'I'll get back what I lost, I will that ...' he said calmly.

'I'll be hard. The manor has long arms and manages to win favour everywhere.'

'There's a way to deal with favour too, there's a way for everything. You need only patience and to wait for the right moment.'

'You are right, Maciej. Well, how cold it is, would be worth stepping into the inn to warm up.'

'Why not. In for a penny, in for a pound. But I'm telling you, only a blacksmith need strike while the iron's hot. If a man wants to win anything, he must forge his fate cold and temper it with patience.'

They were approaching the village, the darkness had grown dense now and the gale was passing; the snowstorm was still whirling briskly along the road so the houses could not be made out, but it was slowly quietening about the world.

The old man pulled up the horses in front of the path leading to the cottage, and when Hanka got out, he helped her put the load on her back and said quietly for her ears only:

'Look in on me some day, even tomorrow. I see times go poorly for you. That scoundrel will drink everything away and you and the children are surely perishing of hunger.'

'You threw us out, so how would I dare come?'

'Foolish you are, that's no matter for you. I'm telling you: come. There's enough for you too.'

She kissed his hand and left without a word, her throat so tight with emotion she couldn't find her voice.

'Will you come?' he called after her, his tone strangely kind and gentle.

'I will. God bless you. Since you order it, I'll come ...'

He urged the horses on and turned immediately before the inn, and Hanka, not waiting for her father, who was just getting down from Bartek's sleigh, rushed into the cottage.

It was dark in the chamber and so cold that it was harder to see inside than out. The children were sleeping, huddled under the quilt. She bustled about with food and chores, thinking all the while of her strange meeting with Boryna.

'You can die in a ditch, I'm not coming. I'd really get it from Antek!' she exclaimed crossly, but at the same time other, calmer thoughts followed, and with them fierce revolt towards her husband.

Why, who'd caused her most suffering, after all, if not him! The old man had signed land over to that swine of a girl and thrown them out, true, but Antek had hit him first and was forever mouthing at him, so he got mad ... He had the right, anyone would have done the same. The land belonged to him and his children, but while he was living it was up to him to give it or not. And how gently he had said it: 'Come!' Asked about the children and everything. Aye, there wouldn't have been half the misery and humiliation if Antek hadn't got with that bitch – the old man wasn't to blame for that, no!

She thought it over, this way and that, and her anger towards the old man receded.

Bylica plodded in at last, chilled to the bone and so tired he had to warm himself a good hour at the fireplace before he began to recount how he had ground to a halt and would have frozen to death under the tree had it not been for Boryna.

'He spotted me and wanted to take me on the sled, but I told him that you'd gone on ahead, so he left me with Bartek and himself he rushed off with the horses to catch up with you ...'

'He did? Didn't say nothing of it to me.'

'He's only hard on the surface, to give nowt away.'

After supper, when the children had eaten their fill and fallen asleep again, wrapped in the quilt, Hanka sat down by the fire to spin the rest of the wool for the organist's wife. The old man was warming himself still. He glanced at her timidly, clearing his throat and steeling himself, until at last he began hesitantly:

'Make peace with him. Never mind Antek, think of yourself and the children.'

'Easy to say.'

'When he were first to turn to you with a good word. Put your anger aside. It's hell in that house of his ... If not today, then tomorrow he'll throw Jagna out and be left alone ... Józka won't manage such a farmstead. He's not old yet, but he can't manage it all himself ... It would be good if you had his favour for that day ... you should aim for that ... You would be to hand at the right moment ... there's no knowing what might happen ... maybe he'd ask you back ... You won't endure this hardship, no ...'

At these words, she dropped the spindle, leaned her head against the distaff and sat there, sunk deep in thought over her fate, slowly weighing her father's counsel. The old man got his bedclothes ready and asked quietly:

'Did he say owt along the road to you?'

She told him it had been.

'Go then, my girl, hurry, soon as tomorrow, turn up since he's asking, hurry ... think on yourself and the children ... Stay close to the old man ... lend an ear ... be good to him ... a meek calf suckles more than one mother ... no one's overcome the world through anger ... Antek will return to you yet ... he's possessed and tossed hither and thither ... but he'll see sense soon enough and come back ... The Lord Jesus has granted you this hour to pull you free of misery ... so pay no heed to anyone and hurry ...'

He spent much time urging and convincing her, but hearing no answer, he fell into a gloomy silence and, having made his bed, lay down to sleep. Hanka, meanwhile, went on spinning, thinking over his advice.

Sometimes she'd glance out of the window to see if Antek was coming back, but there wasn't a sound.

She sat back down to work, but could not spin today. The thread would snap or the spindle fall from her fingers as she weighed Boryna's words more and more keenly.

'Maybe it will happen. Maybe there will come a time when he summons me ...'

And slowly, slowly, still circling, still full of hesitation, a boundless desire for peace began to form in her, a return to things as they used to be.

'Three of us suffering want, and soon there'll be a fourth! Will I manage then, eh?'

She no longer included Antek and did not take him into account right then. With only herself and the children in mind, she felt ready to decide on her own for all of them. Indeed, who was there for her to lean on? Who would help her, if not God alone, perhaps, or Boryna!

She began to dream that if she could only get back to the farm, if she could feel that ground beneath her feet once more, she would so cleave to it, so fasten upon it with her whole soul and every finger that nothing would tear or force her away. Hope grew in her, together with such a surge of strength that she almost burst with the force of it, with determination and boldness. She was all aflame, her eyes sparkled ... she could even feel herself there, at the Borynas', in charge of everything, the woman of the house ...

Hanka went on dreaming a long time, maybe even until midnight. She determined that as soon as it was morning, she would take the children and, as he'd ordered, go to see the old man, no matter how much Antek forbade it. Even if he beat her, she would not listen and she would go, she would not let this chance slip ... She felt unflagging energy to fight the whole world if need be; she did not hesitate now and feared nothing!

She looked out again. The wind had dropped completely. It was quite calm, and the night so dark the grey snow was barely visible. Great clouds swirled and rolled in the sky like water. Dull murmurs came from the distant forest or maybe from the impenetrable darkness.

She put out the light and, whispering her prayers, began to undress.

Suddenly, the quiet juddered with a distant muffled shout, spreading ever more clearly, and with it the windowpanes lit up in a blood-red glare.

She ran outside in alarm.

Something was burning, somewhere. In the middle of the village rose pillars of fire, smoke and flying sparks.

The church bell began to ring, sounding the alarm, and the shouts grew louder.

'Fire, get up, fire!' she shouted to Stach and Weronka, dressed as fast as she could and ran out on to the path, but bumped almost at once into Antek, pelting from the village.

'Who's on fire?'

'I don't know, get back to the house!'

'Maybe it's Father – it seems somewhere in the middle!' she spluttered in mortal terror.

'Get back in, dammit!' he bellowed, dragging her inside by force.

He was all bloody, without his cap, his sheepskin torn, his face blackened and a mad, wild fire in his eyes.

CHAPTER 10

That same day, after chores, and so well into evening, they began to arrive at the Kłąbs' for the spinning party.

Kłąb's wife had asked elderly women in the main – her kin or close friends. They came without fail, one after another, in good time and not too late, for each woman eagerly sought the company of the rest to have a good natter and hear something new.

Wachnikowa was first to arrive, as was her wont, with a handful of wool in her apron and additional spindles under her arm; then came Golebowa, Mateusz's mother, frowning as though she'd tasted vinegar, her face bound up and forever complaining about everything; and after her, like a clucking swollen brood hen, came Walentowa. Sikorzyna followed, thin as a broomstick, chattering nineteen to the dozen and much engrossed in all her neighbours' squabbles; Ploszkowa rolled in next, portly as a barrel, red-faced, stout, always spruced up, smug, lording it over everyone and a windbag like no other, but generally disliked. Right after her, Balcerkowa slipped in quietly, prowling like a tomcat – scrawny and slight, withered, morose and such a dogged plaintiff she'd be at court every month, at loggerheads with half the village. Kobusowa, Wojtek's wife, came clambering impudently after them, though she hadn't been asked – she was the worst of gossips and full of boundless envy, so that the other women shunned friendship with her like fire. Wry-faced Grzela's wife followed, puffing and panting, an old soak of a woman, a sly mocker like you never saw, and the worst of meddlers in other people's business! Old Sochowa came as well, mother of Kłąb's son-in-law, a quiet woman, greatly pious and, next to Dominikowa, most often to be seen in church. Yet others came too, but so select a group there's no knowing what to say of them, for they were alike as geese in a flock so that you could not tell one from another, perhaps only by their garb. All in all it was a sizeable gathering of womenfolk, each bringing what she had: wool to spin, or flax and tow; some brought their sewing, others a handful of down to shred, so as not to give the impression that they'd gathered to no purpose, just to gossip.

They settled themselves in a great circle in the middle of the chamber beneath the lamp hanging from the ceiling, like a wide row of bushes, sturdy, mature, with the blight of late autumn upon them, for all were elderly and almost of an age.

Kłąb's wife greeted each one in the same friendly way, speaking low since she had a weak chest and a breathless, strained voice. Kłąb, meanwhile, being the decent, clever man that he was, and who kept accord with everyone, said kindly words and himself helped shift stools and benches ...

Jagusia arrived a little later, with Józka and Nastka and a few other girls, followed by lads who trailed in one at a time.

It was quite a gathering, for the evenings were long and there was no work to hand. The winter was harsh and the days miserable. It was tedious to go to bed along with the chickens, since by dawn you'd have slept plenty, lying abed till your sides ached.

They scattered about the room and sat where they could, some on benches, some on chests, and some, like the lads, on tree stumps the Kłąbs had brought in from outside. Still, there was ample room in the chamber, for the house was huge, though low, built in the old style, before Kłąb's great-grandfather's time, a hundred and fifty years ago and more, they reckoned. It was sinking into the ground already, hunched like an old man, its thatch brushing the fences, so that they had to prop it up with stilts to stop it collapsing entirely.

The hum of voices rose gradually, for they were still talking quietly among themselves. The spindles rattled and thumped on the floor and here and there a spinning wheel droned, but rarely, for they had little faith in these newfangled inventions, preferring to spin on distaffs.

The four young Kłąbs, grown tall as pines and sprouting moustaches, were by the door, twisting rope from straw. The rest of the lads were sprawled in corners, smoking cigarettes, grinning and joking with the girls, so that the whole chamber shook, off and on, with their chortling and the elders chipped in, adding to the fun and laughter.

Finally, the long-awaited Rocho arrived, with Mateusz at his heels.

'Is it still windy?' a woman asked.

'Stopped completely, weather's turning.'

'Still rumbling from the forest, a thaw's coming for sure,' Kłąb added.

Rocho sat out of the way, by the bowl set aside for him, for he was teaching the Kłąbs' children now, and lived and had his meals there. Meanwhile, Mateusz greeted some of the folk, not even glancing at Jagna, as though he hadn't noticed her, though she sat in the middle directly in view. She gave a faint smile at this, imperceptibly keeping an eye on the entrance.

'The wind blew that hard today, may the hand of God defend us! The women dragged themselves back half alive from the forest, and they say Hanka and Bylica are still not returned,' Sochowa said.

'Aye, the wind ever blows 'gainst the backs of the poor,' Kobusowa muttered.

'What that Hanka has come to!' began Ploszkowa, but noticing Jagna's face aflame, broke off quickly to take some other tack.

'Has Jagustynka not been?' asked Rocho.

'No gossip nor scandal to feast on here, so the company's not to her taste.'

'The woman's a tattletale, she stirred up that much trouble at the Szymkows' that the Soltys's wife and the Voyt's swore at each other and but for other folk it would've ended in a fight.'

'Cause they let her carry on.'

'And give way as though she's an honest body.'

'Is there no one to make her pay for this constant strife and bickering!'

'But everyone knows what she's like, so why do they give such a mischief-maker credit?'

'Oh aye, and who can tell when she's telling the truth and when she's lying!'

'It's all because everyone's happy to hear talk at someone else's expense,' Ploszkowa concluded.

'Let her try starting on me, I wouldn't stand for it!' cried Tereska, the soldier's wife.

'Ha, as if she weren't blabbing about you all over the village every day already,' Balcerkowa murmured scornfully.

'Repeat it if you've heard owl!' Tereska shrieked, reddening, for everyone knew that she was close to Mateusz.

'I will, straight to your face, soon as your man's back from the army!'

'Lay off! It's all nonsense!'

'Stop yelling when no one's attacking you,' Ploszkowa scolded sternly, but Tereska could not calm down for some time and kept muttering under her breath.

'Have they been with the bear?' ¹ asked Rocho, to direct attention elsewhere.

'They're at the organist's, so any minute now.'

'Who's doing the rounds?'

'Oh, it's those Gulbas rascals and Filipka's boys!'

'They're coming, they're coming!' the girls began to shout, for a long roar was heard outside, followed by the voices of various animals in the hallway: a cock crowing, a sheep bleating, a horse neighing – all of them led by someone playing a reed pipe. Eventually, the doors opened and first in came a boy, the bear-keeper, in a sheepskin turned inside out and a tall hat, his face tarred and looking like a Gypsy, dragging the very bear in question on a long straw rope. It was clad entirely in pea straw, with a sheepskin head, moving paper ears and a red tongue lolling almost to its elbows. Sticks were fastened to its hands, wound in more pea straw and stuffed into clogs, so that it walked as if on all fours. Behind it came the bear-tamer, with a straw whip and a stick bristling with sharp pegs on which pieces of fat and bits of bread were stuck and hung with little bulging bags. Finally came the organist's Michal playing a pipe and a whole band of lads thumping the ground with sticks and shouting at the tops of their voices.

The bear-tamer praised God in greeting, then crowed like a cockerel, bleated like a sheep, neighed like a fiery stallion and proclaimed:

'Bear-tamers are we from a distant land, from across the wide sea, from beyond the great forest! Where people walk upside down, where fences are made of sausages and where they cool themselves by fires. Where they put cooking pots out in the sun, the pigs swim in the ponds and it rains vodka. We bring a fierce bear and travel the world! We're told there are rich farmers in this village, generous farmers, beautiful lasses, so we have come from a distant land, beyond the wide river, to find provision, gracious welcome and something for the road. Amen.'

'Show us your tricks, and happen there'll be something for you from the storeroom,' Kłąb declared.

'Right away! *Hej!* Piper, play! Dance, bear, dance!' the bear-tamer shouted, pelting the bear with the stick, whereupon the pipe shrieked a high-pitched tune. The boys, whooping, set upon the floor with their staffs, the bear-keeper mimicked all kinds of voices and the bear began jumping on all fours, moving its ears, swinging its tongue, bucking, and chasing the girls, while the bear-tamer, pretending to restrain him, cracked the whip with all his might, shouting:

'Any lass without a man, here's some pea straw in your hand!'

The room was in uproar – shouts, commotion, running about, chasing, squeals and such merriment that folk clutched their sides with laughter. The bear frolicked all the while, playing tricks, rolling on the ground, bellowing, lurching about comically or hugging the girls with its wooden legs and making them dance to the tunes of Michal's pipe, while the so-called bear-tamers and other lads horsed around so that it was a wonder the cottage didn't burst with the din, the chasing and laughter!

Kłębowa gave them hearty helpings of food, and finally they left, but their shouts and the barking of dogs echoed a long time down the road.

'Who was playing the bear?' asked Sochowa when it had quietened down a bit.

'Contrary Jasiek – did you not recognize him?'

'I couldn't tell under that shaggy sheepskin head.'

'Well, I never, he's got a head for tricks, that misfit,' Kobusowa remarked.

'You talk as though Jasiek were completely stupid!' Nastka defended him. Mateusz chimed in, telling all sorts about him – how he appeared shy, but he was all there – and so supported Jasiek's case that no one objected, and only shrewd, half-hidden smiles began to flit across faces.

They sat down again at their former places and chatted merrily. The girls, meanwhile, with Józka at their head, as the boldest, fell upon Rocho at the fireside and began to pester and cajole him to tell some story, as at the Borynas' back in autumn.

'And do you remember, Józka, what I told you then?'

'Oh yes! It was about the Lord Jesus' little Burek!'

'Today I'll tell you about the kings, if you're interested.'

They pushed a stool under the lamp, stepping back a little to let him sit in the middle, like an old grey oak in a glade, surrounded by a semicircle of low dense bushes. He began to speak slowly and quietly.

The chamber fell silent, so that only the hum of spindles could be heard, or the fire crackling in the chimney and the murmur of someone sighing. Rocho told all kinds of marvels, recounting tales of kings, of cruel wars, of mountains where a bewitched army sleeps, waiting only for a trumpet summons to awaken and fall upon and conquer the enemy and cleanse the earth of evil;² of enormous castles and golden chambers where enchanted princesses in white robes lamented on moonlit nights, waiting for a saviour, where every night the sound of music was heard in empty rooms, dances were held, folk came together, but as soon as the cock crowed everyone vanished back to their tombs; of countries where there were people tall as trees, giants who could toss mountains, boundless treasures guarded by hellish dragons, where there were firebirds, brigands, magic cudgels, the divine twins Lel and Polel, and of noonwraiths, phantoms, ghouls, witchery and other oddities;³ And yet more tales, strange and miraculous and downright unbelievable, so that spindles were dropped and souls were caught up in enchanted worlds, eyes blazed and tears streamed with untold rapture. It was a wonder their hearts didn't leap right out of their breasts with longing and amazement.

And finally he told of a king – whom gentlemen mockingly dubbed the peasant king, seeing as he was a decent man and just, doing good for all the nation – of his fierce wars and his wanderings, dressed in peasant garb, in which he went about the villages, in brotherhood, seeking out wickedness and righting wrongs, assuaging anger. In order to be at one with the peasant folk, he married a farmer's daughter from Kraków's outskirts. Zofia was her name. She bore him children, he took her to his castle in Kraków and there he governed for many a year, like the best father of the nation and its foremost farmer!⁴

They listened intently, not missing a word, to the point of holding their breath so as not to interrupt this litany of wonders. Jagusia could not spin at all. Her hands fell, she bent her head and leaned her cheek against her distaff as she fixed her deep blue shining eyes on Rocho's face, which seemed to her like that of a saint come down from a holy picture, with his grey hair, long white beard and those pale eyes, gazing somewhere into the beyond. She listened with her whole soul, with all the ardour of a deeply sensitive heart, and was so passionately gripped by his tales that she could barely breathe. She saw it all as though before her very eyes, her soul following where his words led, and her heart was captured most of all by the story of the king and the farmer's daughter. Jesus, how beautiful that seemed to her!

'And the king himself lived with the peasants like that!' remarked Kłab after a long silence.

'The king himself!'

'Jesus, I'd die if the king spoke to me!' whispered Nastka.

'I'd follow him anywhere in the world for a single word! Anywhere!' cried Jagna ardently, overwhelmed by such powerful and passionate emotion that were he to appear at that moment, were he to say the word, she'd go, just as she was, into the night, into the frost, out into the whole wide world!

They showered Rocho with questions. Where were there such castles, such armies, such riches, such might, such beauty and such kings – where?

He answered somewhat sadly, but with such wisdom, explaining many a truth and maxim, that they just sighed, meditating deeply and weighing the ways of Providence in the world ...

'Today alone is in human hands, tomorrow is in the power of God!' said Kłab.

Rocho rested, tired now, and since all were still caught up in his tales, they began to recount stories they had heard themselves, quietly at first and then aloud for all to hear.

One woman piped up, another after her, a third recalled something, then a fourth, and each had something new to add, so that their tittle-tattle spun like thread from a distaff, like rays of moonlight dancing across blind, lifeless waters, hidden in the forest. They told of the ghost of a drowned woman coming at night to suckle a hungry babe, of vampires whose hearts had to be pierced with an aspen spike in their coffins to stop them drinking human blood, of a noonwraith strangling her victims along the baulks, of talking trees, werewolves, terrifying midnight spectres, ghosts, hanged men, witches and repentant souls, and of such strange, alarming things your hair stood on end to hear of them, your heart froze in terror. A cold shiver ran through all present, and they were suddenly silent, looking round fearfully, listening out. It seemed as though something was walking above the ceiling, or lurking outside the windows, as though bloodshot eyes were peering through the windowpanes and indistinct shadows swirling in the room's dark corners ... so that many a woman crossed herself quickly, stammering a prayer in the silence with chattering teeth ... But it passed quickly, like a cloud blotting out the sun, so that afterwards it was as though it were never there ... And they told more stories,⁵ spun and reeled their endless yarns, to which Rocho himself listened attentively and told a new tale about a horse ...

'There was once a poor farmer with five morgan and a horse, but the animal was a wayward lazybones such as you never saw. In vain did the farmer humour him and fatten him on oats. He could not please him and the horse refused to work, snapping his harness and kicking his heels; there was no approaching him ... One day, the farmer, mightily cross, marked that since kindness was fruitless, he would put him to the plough and began deliberately to till a long-fallow field to tire the horse and bend him to meekness. But the horse refused to pull, so the farmer flogged him soundly with a crop and forced him. The horse gave in but took it as an insult and remembered it well, until he found a convenient moment. When the farmer bent over to remove his tethers, the horse lashed out with his hind legs and killed him on the spot before shooting off into the wide world and to freedom!

'In the summer it was not too bad. The horse lazed about in the shade and grazed on other folk's wheat. But when winter came and the snows fell, the frost struck, fodder was scarce and the cold sank into his very bones, so he set off once more to find provender. He galloped for days and nights, for winter drew on still, with snows and frosts, and the wolves always on his tail so that more than one had sunk its claws into his sides!

'He ran and ran and arrived at last at the edge of winter, in some meadow where it was warm, the grass grew knee-high, streams burbled and sparkled in the sunshine, cool shade shimmered at the edges and a gentle breeze blew. He waded into the grass and set about gobbling, for he was ravenous, but as soon as he gripped the grass with his teeth, he found he was biting on sharp stones – the grass had vanished! He wanted to drink – no water, only stinking mud was left. He wanted to lie down in the shade – the shadows fled, and the sun beat down fiercely, like living fire! The old horse neighed painfully. Some horses in the distance replied. He set off in their direction and at last saw beyond the meadows a fine manor, as though all of silver. Its windowpanes were of precious stones and its thatch seemed studded with stars, and there were folk moving about. He headed towards them, for now he'd prefer hard work to dying miserably of hunger ... He stood in the sweltering heat all day long, but no one came out to him with a bridle until evening, when someone approached him – the farmer himself! It was Jesus, the Heavenly Master, our Blessed Lord, and he says:

“There's no place for you here, you good-for-nothing murderer. When those who now curse you give you their blessing, then shall I order that you be admitted into the stable.”

“He beat me, so I defended myself!”

“The beating is my concern, and justice too is in my hands.”

“I'm so hungry, I'm so thirsty, I'm so sore!” the horse moaned.

“I've spoken – away with you, or I'll order the wolves to bait and chase you ...”

'And so the poor horse turned back to the land of winter, and plodded cold and hungry and in great terror, for the wolves, like Jesus' hounds, were hard on his heels, terrifying him with their howls – until one night just before spring, he stood before the gates of his old farmer and neighed for them to let him in again. But out flew the widow and her children and, recognizing him, though he was so emaciated, set about beating him with whatever came to hand, chasing him off and cursing him for the harm he'd done, for on account of the farmer's death she had grown poor and lived in great hardship together with her children.

'He returned to the woods, not knowing what to do next. Wild beasts attacked him and he did not even defend himself, indifferent towards his own death now, but they just mauled him and their leader said:

“We won't eat you, it's a waste of our claws since you're nothing but skin and bones, but we'll take pity on you and help you ...”

'They took him with them and in the morning led him to the farmer's field and harnessed him to the plough that was standing there, where the widow and children used the cow to pull it.

“They'll plough with you, feed you up, and in autumn we'll come back to unharness you!” they said.

'Come daybreak, up came the widow and, recognizing him straight away, exclaimed at once that it was a miracle he'd returned and was standing ready at the plough, but soon the grief of memories so overwhelmed her that she began again to curse and beat him, as hard as she could! And many a time she did the same, again and again, and paid him back for her injury! Thus years went by in hard and patient toil, for though the horse's skin chafed from his collar he did not neigh, knowing that he was suffering justly. A few years later, when the widow had found a new husband and added fields running alongside to her morgan, she softened towards the horse and said:

“You wronged us, but through you the Lord Jesus blessed us, the crops grew, a decent man turned up, I bought more fields, so now I forgive you from my heart.”

'And that very same night, when they were celebrating a christening in the house, the Lord Jesus' wolves came, led the horse out of the stable and took him to the heavenly paddocks!

Everyone marvelled greatly at this divine twist of fate, deliberating at length how the Lord Jesus always punished evil and rewarded good and how, given the example of this horse, he forgot nothing.

'Even the little insect burrowing in the wall cannot hide from His eyes ...'

'Nor even the most secret of thoughts, or foul desires,' added Rocho.

Jagna flinched at that, for Antek had just entered, but hardly anyone noticed him, though it was quiet throughout, as Walentowa was at that moment recounting some tale about an enchanted princess, and the spindles had ceased to thrum. Everyone's hands were still, they held their breath and sat as though spellbound, with rapt attention.

And so that cold winter's evening passed.

They were transported, their minds flying up to the heavens and smouldering like pitch-black logs, so that only the murmur of sighs, dreams and desires could be heard, fluttering about the chamber like April butterflies.

Swaddled as they were in a living, vibrating colourful cocoon of marvels, the sight of the sad grey world was completely veiled from their eyes!

They stumbled about dark fields, illumined by spectres that flamed like burning blood-red torches; they walked by silver brooks, filled with the sound of uncanny singing, mysterious calls, and splashes; through cursed woodlands they went, among knights, giants, castles, terrible phantoms, fiendish fire-breathing dragons; they stood frightened at crossroads, where wraiths flew overhead cackling, where the damned voices of hanged men moaned, and vampires with bats' wings flew past; they roamed among tombs following the shadows of repentant suicides; in empty ruined castles and churches they listened to strange voices; they gazed upon endless processions of harrowing visions; they witnessed battles and peered beneath the waters, where sleeping swallows, wreathed together, were woken each spring by the Mother of God and released into the world.

They roamed through heaven and hell, through all kinds of terrors, through the darkness of God's wrath and the brightness of His holy mercy, through untold lands of marvels and enchantment, wonder and delight, through worlds where human souls stumble like birds stunned by thunderbolts and lightning, through places that folk see only at a magical hour or in sleep, and gaze bedazzled, marvelling, hardly knowing if they are still among the living!

Hej! It was as though an impenetrable sea had arisen in a wave of spells and shimmering wonders, so that everything beyond it fell away – the chamber, the cold night, this daily round of trials and miseries, injuries and tears, regrets and longings – and their eyes opened on to another world, new and unutterably marvellous!

A fairytale world surrounded them, a fairytale life enveloped them in rainbows, fairytale dreams became reality. They almost died of elation and were at once reborn into that great, bright, powerful, exuberant and blessed life, shot through with marvels like ripe corn with poppies and vetch, where every tree speaks, every brook sings, every bird is enchanted, every stone has a soul, every forest is full of magic, every clod of earth replete with unknown powers – where all things great, superhuman and invisible lived a miraculous and holy life!

They strained towards it with an all-powerful yearning. They wandered, bewitched, everything entwined in an unbreakable chain of dreams and reality, marvels and desires, an enchanted ethereal pageant, towards which their disfigured weary wounded souls struggled constantly, through all the misery of earthly existence!

What was this grey and wretched life, what was this ordinary day? No more than a sick man's vision, shrouded by sorrows as by mist. No more than darkness, a hard sad night through which you might glimpse these wonders perhaps only at the hour of death.

Like cattle, bent to the ground under the yoke, so do you live, O man. You strive, you struggle to survive the day and never pause to think of what goes on around you, what scents waft like incense across the world, from what holy altars voices come, what hidden marvels wait everywhere!

Like a blind stone you live, O man, deep under the water ...

In darkness, O man, do you till life's field, sowing tears, and toil, and pain ...

And your starlit soul wallows in the mud, O man, in the mud ...

They went on telling many a tale and Rocho willingly joined in, marvelling along with them, sighing and crying when the others cried ...

Sometimes there were long deep silences, so that you could hear the thudding of agitated hearts. Damp eyes shone like dew, while sighs of longing and astonishment escaped them and their souls bowed to the Lord's feet in this temple of miracles, singing a mighty hymn of gratitude. All hearts sang in silence, brimming with enchantment, trembling, intoxicated by the blessed communion of dreams – as the ground trembles, basking in the spring sunshine, or a pool towards evening in fine calm weather, so that only ripples, rainbows and colours disturb the water, or like young wheat on an evening in early May, swaying sweetly, with drawn-out murmurs, shaking its feathery ears in a prayer of thanksgiving.

Jagusia was in heaven, so deeply did she feel it all. She took it so to heart – as though it were truth itself, it seemed to grow and stand before her – she could have cut it all in paper. The children handed her some written sheets from which Rocho taught them and as she listened she cut out ghouls or kings, or ghosts, or dragons, or all manner of things, so cleverly anyone could tell at a glance what they were.

She cut out enough to paste the length of a whole beam, and she coloured them too, with the red and blue paint that Antek handed her. So absorbed was she in listening and in her task that she forgot the whole world, failed to notice even him, not remarking his impatience or his stealthy signs ... Nor did anyone take note, so absorbed were they and such was the quietness that reigned.

Suddenly the dogs began to bark vehemently and howl at the fences, until a young Kłab went out and said that some man had run off from under the window.

They paid no attention, not noticing at all, that later, when the dogs fell silent, a face flitted past the pane and disappeared so quickly that only one girl took fright, shrieking and rubbing her eyes in disbelief.

'There's someone out under the windows!' she cried.

'You can hear the snow crunching under his feet!'

'Like he's scrambling up the walls!'

They all stopped dead to listen, suddenly overcome with terror and fearing to move from the spot.

'You'll conjure what you speak of,' whispered one of them.

'All that talk of the Evil One has summoned him and now he's looking who to snatch!'

'Jesus, Mary!'

'Look out, boys, go on – it's probably nothing, just dogs jumping in the snow.'

'Ha, when I saw it clear as can be through the window, head big as a bucket and red eyes!'

'You're imagining things!' called Rocho. Since no one wanted to look, he went outside himself, to calm them all down.

'I'll tell you a story about the Mother of God, and your visions will soon vanish,' he said, sitting down in his former place. They calmed down a little, though now and then someone would glance at the window and shiver with barely concealed fright.

'It was long, long ago, in ages past so that only ancient volumes recall it ... In a village near Kraków there lived a free peasant.⁶ Kazimierz was his name, dubbed the Hawk. His family had settled there long ago, and he was a rich man. He sowed dozens of morgen, had his own forest, a cottage like a manor and a mill on the stream. The Lord Jesus blessed him and all was going well. His hayricks were always full, there was ready money in his chests, the children were healthy and his wife was honest. For he was a good man, intelligent, understanding, humble of heart and just towards all creatures.

'He led the community like a father, cared for the poor, stood up for justice, did not overburden folk with taxes, and was diligently honest in all things and always first to help and to rescue his neighbour.

'He lived quietly too, peacefully and happily, snug as a bug in a rug.

'Until one day, the king began to rally the folk to war against the pagans.

'The Hawk was greatly troubled, for he was sad to leave behind his home and set off for fierce battles.

'But here was the king's man, standing at the door and hastening him!

'A great war was in the offing, for the brazen Turk had encroached upon Polish lands, was burning villages, robbing churches, slaughtering priests, killing folk or driving them, bound, back to his pagan lands.

'They had to make ready and defend themselves!

'Eternal salvation awaits the one who willingly lays down his head for his people and his holy faith.

'The Hawk called a band of men together, he chose the stoutest lads, horses, and carts and they set off early in the morning once holy Mass was done!

'The whole village saw them off with tears and lamenting as far as the Częstochowa statue that stood at the crossroads.

'He fought a year, he fought another, until at last all news of him faded away.

'The others had long since returned home, but of the Hawk there was neither sight nor sound. They thought he must have been killed or taken captive by the Turk, of which even beggars and travellers whispered tales ...

'Until at last, when the third year had passed, he returned at the start of spring, but alone, without his retinue, without wagons or horses, or infantry, emaciated and carrying only a stick, like a beggar ... He prayed fervently before the Mother of God that they would permit him to keep his lands, and hurried towards the village ...

'No one greeted him, no one recognized him. He had to chase off the dogs. He came to his own house and rubbed his eyes, crossing himself, for he could not recognize it ...

'Jesus, Mary! The threshing floor was gone, the stables were gone, the orchards were gone, even the fences were gone. Of the livestock not a trace ... and of the house there was nothing but the burnt foundations ... The children were gone ... emptiness ... terrible ... Only his sick wife shuffled out from the ruins to meet him and what bitter tears she shed!

'He was as though thunderstruck!

'For while he was away at war and hammering the Lord's enemies, pestilence had visited his house and smitten all his children ... lightning had struck and burnt it down ... wolves had killed all his flocks ... evil people had robbed him ... neighbours had taken his land ... drought had scorched his wheat ... hail had flattened the rest ... so that nothing was left, only earth and sky.

'He sat on the threshold like a dead man, but towards evening, when they were ringing the Angelus, he suddenly leapt to his feet and began to curse and swear vengeance in a terrible voice!

'In vain did his wife try to restrain him, in vain did she beg at his feet; he cursed and cursed that he had spilled his blood for nothing in the Lord's cause, for nothing had he defended churches, in vain had he sustained wounds and borne hunger, in vain had he been honest and pious, all in vain. God had abandoned him anyway and condemned him to ruin!

'He blasphemed terribly against the name of God, and shouted that he might as well hand himself over completely to the Evil One, for he was the only one who did not abandon people in their poverty.

'And indeed, at such a summoning the devil soon appeared before him.
'Reckless with anger now, the Hawk called out:
"Help me, Devil, if you can, for I have been greatly wronged."
'The fool, he did not mark that the Lord Jesus wished to test and try him.
"If I do, will you give up your soul?" screeched the Evil One.
"I will, and right away!"

'They wrote a chirograph,⁷ which the Hawk signed in the blood of his ring finger. And from that day on everything began to go well. He did little himself, just giving orders and supervising.

Michalek, which is the name by which the Evil One asked to be known, worked for him, and other demons, dressed as farmhands or as Germans,⁸ helped too, so that before long the farm was even bigger, better and richer than before.

'Only new children were there none, for how could there be without God's blessing!

'The Hawk was greatly agitated by this, and sometimes at night he would brood about burning in the eternal fires of hell, and neither his riches nor anything else delighted him ... Until Michalek had to reveal before his very eyes how all the wealthy, all the gentlemen, kings, scholars and even the greatest bishops had sold themselves to the devil in their lifetimes, and how not one was ever anxious or ruminated on what might be after death but had his fun and took his fill of pleasure!

'So the Hawk was reassured and railed against God even more, even chopping down the cross standing beside the forest and throwing the holy pictures out of his house. He set about the Czestochowa statue, ready to smash it, since it hampered his tillage, and was barely dissuaded by his wife's cries and pleading.

'And so year followed year like swiftly flowing water. His wealth grew immeasurably, and with it his standing, so that the king himself visited, invited him to court and seated him among his own chamberlains.

'The Hawk preened himself at this, boasting, pushing the poor aside, abandoning all honesty and treating the whole world like dirt.

'The fool! He took no heed of how he'd have to pay for it ...

'Until at last the hour of reckoning came. The Lord Jesus had now lost all patience and indulgence for this hardened sinner ...

'The time for judgement and punishment had come.

'First he was beset by grave illnesses that gave him not a second's respite.

'Then his livestock were hit by pestilence.

'Then lightning struck and burned all his outbuildings.

'Then hail flattened his crops.

'Then his servants ran away.

'Then came such droughts that everything was scorched to ashes, the trees withered, the waters dried up, the ground cracked.

'Then folk abandoned him completely and poverty hunkered down on his threshold.

'Finally, he fell gravely ill, his flesh wasted away and his bones crumbled.

'In vain did he whimper for help to Michalek and his devilish cronies. Even the Evil One can do nothing when the hand of the God of wrath hangs over him!

'And the devils too cared not a jot; he was theirs, so let him die as quick as can be, and they breathed on those terrible wounds of his to make them fester even more.

'Only the mercy of God could save him!

'One autumn, there came a night so windy that a gale tore off the roof and ripped out all the doors and windows, and immediately a whole band of devils flew down and began dancing all round the house, trying to squeeze inside with their pitchforks, for the Hawk was close to death ...

'His wife defended him as best she could, shielding him with a holy picture, or marking the threshold and windows with blessed chalk. She was greatly perturbed lest he die without the sacraments and reconciliation with God, so though he forbade it, so obdurate was he, even in his final hours, and though evil hindered her, she found a good moment and rushed to the presbytery. But the priest was preparing to leave for somewhere and did not wish to come to a godless man.

"What God has abandoned, the devils must take. There's nothing for me there now ..." And off he rode to the manor to play cards.

'Crying bitterly in her vexation, she knelt down by the statue of the Lady of Czestochowa and, sobbing desperately, with heartfelt anguish, she whimpered for mercy.

'The Holy Maid took pity on her and said:

"Do not cry, good woman, your pleas have been heard ..."

'And down she came from her altar just as she stood, in her gold crown and blue robe, scattered with stars, her rosary at her waist ... beaming kindness ... most holy and like unto the morning star ... The woman fell on her face before her.

'Raising her with holy hands, she wiped away the woman's forlorn tears, pressed her to her heart and said tenderly:

"Take me to the house, faithful servant. Perhaps I can help."

'She looked at the sick man and her merciful heart was greatly troubled.

"We cannot do without a priest – I am only a woman and I do not have the power that Jesus has given to priests! The man's a scoundrel, has no care for the people, a thoroughly bad pastor, he will answer for it dearly, but he alone has the power to absolve sins ... I myself will go to the manor to fetch that gambler ... Here is a rosary – defend the sinner with it until I return."

'But how would she get there? ... The night was dark, wind, rain, mud, a goodly distance, and devils making mischief everywhere.

'The Heavenly Lady was not perturbed, oh no! She simply dressed for the bluster in a shawl and set off into the darkness ...

'Having reached the manor sorely tired and soaked to the skin, she knocked and asked humbly that the priest come urgently to a sick man. But he, seeing that it was some poor woman and foul weather without, ordered that she be told he would come in the morning, he did not have time now, and went on playing, drinking and carousing with the gentlemen.

'Sighing sorrowfully at his dishonesty, the Mother of God instantly summoned a golden carriage, a team of horses and footmen. She changed into a stately matron and entered the chambers.

'Of course, the priest soon went willingly and in all haste.

'They arrived just in time, but death was already sitting on the threshold, and the devils were forcing their way in, to snatch the man alive before the priest could arrive with the Lord Jesus, while the woman did her best to defend him with the rosary, or by holding the door shut with a holy picture, or with a prayer, or the Lord's Name.

'The Hawk made his confession and repented his sins. God forgave him, he gained absolution and at that moment gave up his soul to God. The Most Holy Lady herself closed his eyes, then blessed the woman and said to the petrified priest:

"Now you follow me!"

'The priest had not yet gathered his wits, but he went. He looked about outside the cottage, and here were neither carriage, nor footmen, only rain, mud, darkness and death, following him step for step ...

'Terrified, he legged it after the Lady towards the chapel!

'He looked inside, and saw her now in robe and crown, surrounded by choirs of angels, as she stepped on to the altar to take up her former place.

'Then he recognized the Queen of Heaven and fear overwhelmed him. He fell to his knees, burst into tears and stretched out his arms for mercy.

'And the Holy Lady looked at him crossly and declared:

"You will kneel thus for centuries for your sins, and shed many a tear before you've made atonement ..."

'He promptly turned into stone and there he stayed, crying by night, holding out his arms, awaiting mercy, and thus he kneels still, now and for ever and an age. Amen!

'And to this day, you can see this figure at Dąbrowo near Przedbórz. By the church it stands as an eternal reminder and warning to sinners, that punishment for evil passes no one by.⁹

A long and deep silence fell over them all. Each one thought over what they had heard and each was filled with holy quietude, awe, kindness and trepidation.

What is there to say at such a moment, when the human soul expands like iron in the fire, swelling with emotion and such clarity that you need only touch it and it will explode in a rain of stars and form a rainbow between heaven and earth.

They sat on in silence, until the last embers within them began to fade.

Mateusz pulled out his pipe and started to play, teasing a melancholy lilting tune out of the silence, as though someone were scattering dew over cobwebs, while Sochowa sang 'Beneath Thy Protection'.¹⁰ Everyone joined in quietly.

And then slowly they began to talk of this and that, in the usual way.

The young joked among themselves, while Tereska the soldier's wife began to pose the lads funny riddles, and since someone said that Boryna was back from the courts and drinking in the inn now with his company, Jagusia quietly gathered her things and left, not even calling Józka. Antek slipped out stealthily after her, caught her on the threshold in the hallway and, clasping her hand tightly, led her to a different door, to the farmyard and from there through the orchard and behind the barn.

Their departure was barely noticed, for Tereska was calling out loud:

'Through the body, through the soul; under the quilt it starts to grow. What's that?

'Bread, bread – everyone knows that one!' they cried, gathering round her.

'Well, then: the lime bridge shakes when the guests give chase.'

'Peas and a sieve!'

'Every child knows those riddles.'

‘Tell us a cleverer one, then!’

‘Into the world it comes en clothed; through the world it naked goes.’

They guessed at that a long time, until Mateusz said that it was cheese, and he himself posed this riddle:

‘The linden tree sings merrily, while the horse flicks its tail at the sheep.’

They guessed, with some difficulty, that it meant a fiddle. [11](#)

Tereska came up with an even harder one:

‘No legs, no head, no belly, no hands; wherever it spins, there nothing can stand.’

That was the wind. They began to bicker and jest and the riddles grew more comical, so that the whole room resounded with noise and merriment.

And so they amused themselves together, long into the night.

CHAPTER 11

They bolted into the orchard, slipped furtively under the drooping branches and ran, like startled deer, quick and timorous, behind the barn, into the murky snows, into the starless darkness, into the unfathomable silence of the frozen fields.

They disappeared into the night. The village vanished, the clamour of humans suddenly ceased, even the faintest of lively echoes was snatched away, so that soon they lost sight of everything. Arms around each other's waists, they clung tight, hip to hip. Bending a little, joyful but afraid, silent but brimming with song, they pelted with all their strength into the wide world, wrapped in deep blue silence.

'Jagna!'

'What?'

'You're really here?'

'Course I am!'

They said nothing more, only pausing at times to catch their breath.

The fearful beating of their hearts and a mighty cry of stifled joy stopped their voices. They shot glances at each other constantly, eyes shining like scorching forks of mute lightning, while their lips dashed against each other with the force of thunderbolts and with such hungry, ravenous passion that they reeled in stupor, gasping for breath, a wonder that their hearts didn't burst. The ground caved beneath their feet, they fell into a fiery precipice and, looking about, blinded with ardour, they suddenly tore from the spot and dashed off again, not knowing whither they would go or how, so long as it was further away, even into the deepest night, into the densest snarl of shadows ...

Another field ... another two ... further ... deeper ... until everything disappeared from sight, the whole world, even the memory of it, all was completely forgotten, like an unrecalled dream known only through the soul, a wondrous vision, like the waking dream back there, at the Kłqbs' cottage, barely a moment ago. Still plunged in a dazzling stream of hushed mystical tales, they brimmed with wonders and apparitions, and still those dreamlike fairytale powers showered their souls in the marvellous blossom of enchantment, of holy terrors, amazement, elation and unappeasable desires!

Caught up in a magical rainbow of wonders and fantasies, they were swept along in a dancing chain of marvels conjured but minutes ago. They crossed fabulous lands, passed through superhuman scenes showing every kind of deed and spectacle, every kind of spell and enchantment. Visions swayed in the shadows, roved the skies, springing up wherever they looked, flooding their hearts and snatching their breath away, until they froze with dread and, taking fright, clung to each other dumbstruck, gazing into the bottomless, tangled depths of dreams, until their souls blossomed into a flower of awe, into the holiest flower of faith and prayerful elation, and they touched the very core of wonder and oblivion.

And then, as they returned to consciousness, their baffled eyes searched the night a long time, uncertain: were they still among the living? Were those wonders only in their heads, or was it all dream and delusion?

'You frightened, Jagna?'

'Me? I'd die following you to the end of the world!' she protested in a whisper, pressing against him fiercely ...

'Were you waiting for me?' he asked after a moment.

'And how! I'd jump soon as anyone came on to the porch ... That's why I went off to the Kłqbs' – I was thinking I just couldn't wait any longer ...'

'But when I came in, you made out not to see me ...'

'You stupid ... was I to stare so's they'd notice! But it squeezed so hard in the pit of me, I nearly fell off my stool ... I had to have a drink of water to recover ...'

'My dearest!'

'I could feel you sitting behind, but I was scared to look at you, scared to say a word ... and my heart was thumping so hard, knocking so loud, people must've heard ... Jesus! I nearly yelled with joy!'

'I guessed I'd see you at the Kłqbs' and we'd leave together ...'

'I meant to hurry home but you caught me.'

'So did you not want to, Jagna?'

'Nay ... I often thought, let it happen ... so often ...'

'You did! You did, then!' he whispered passionately.

'As if I wouldn't, Jantoś! On and on ... It was no good over by the stile ...'

'True ... no one'll startle us here ... We're on our own ...'

'On our own! ... It's pitch-black ... and ...' she whispered, throwing her arms around his neck, embracing him with all the force of love and frenzy ...

The wind had died down in the fields; only a soft gust whispered occasionally, cool against their burning faces. No stars were glowing, nor was there a moon, the sky hung low, tangled in clouds with dirty ragged fleeces, as though a herd of brown oxen had settled on the bare empty fallows. The distance loomed as though through a sprawl of grey smoke and the whole world seemed choked in mist, with swirling dregs of darkness lapping on every side.

A deep, disquieting, though barely discernible murmur troubled the air. It seemed to flow from the woods submerged in the night, or from the clouds, from their deep clefts which, from time to time, released flocks of small white puffs that fled swiftly, like spring birds pursued by hawks.

It was a dark and storm-ridden night, silent yet strangely agitated, full of dread, indeterminate quiverings and fearful rustlings, skulking spectres and the sudden surfacing of inexplicable and terrifying things. Sometimes a ghostly snowy pallor would glimmer unexpectedly from under drifts of darkness, or some icy sheen, damp and oozing, slithered in coils through the shadows, followed by a pall of black impenetrable gloom, as though the night had shut its eyelids tight and the whole world had disappeared, so that human eyes, unable to discern anything, darted helplessly in utter dismay and the soul was petrified, crushed by the hollow torpor of the grave. Then the screen of shadows would be torn away a moment, split as though rent by a thunderbolt, and through the yawning fissures in the clouds, the dark blue depths of a quiet starry sky could be seen.

Then from the fields again or cottages, or from the skies or sunken horizons – impossible to say – came the fleeting trace of intermittent voices, or sparks, or lost echoes, the ghost of sounds and things long dead and wandering the earth, floating in a pitiful dance into the unknown, like the dead light of distant stars.

But they were blind to everything. A storm had risen in them and grew, intensifying with every moment, tumbling from heart to heart in a torrent of burning but unspoken desires, flashing glances, painful shudders, sudden fears, scorching kisses, stammered words – confused but dazzling as fierce lightning bolts – deathly silences, tenderness and such bewitchment that they smothered each other in a tight embrace, crushing each other to the point of agony, tearing at each other as though they wished to rip out the other's innards and wallowing in the delight of pain. Their eyes filmed over and they saw nothing now, not even their own selves.

Swept away on a torrent of love, blind to everything, crazed and completely out of their minds, fused like two burning torches, they were borne along into impenetrable night, into emptiness and utter isolation, in mutual abandonment unto death, to the bottom of their souls, consumed with insatiable hunger ...

By now, they couldn't speak. Only instinctive cries jerked free from deep in the gut, only stifled whispers, fitful, but soaring like flames, raving rambling words, and glances penetrating to the bone, mad and terror-struck, like pounding hurricanes, until, shaken by such spasms of desire, they clutched each other with a fierce yelp and dropped down ... barely conscious.

The whole world spun and plummeted with them into a fiery abyss ...

'I'm losing my mind!'

'Don't shout, Jagna ... quiet ...'

'I have to, else I'll go mad!'

'Feels like my heart's going to burst!'

'I'll burn up ... Lord, let go, let me catch my breath ...'

'Jesus ... I'm dying ... Jesus!'

'My one, my only ...'

'Jantoś! Jantoś!'

... As vital juices hidden deep beneath the ground awaken every spring, swell in perpetual craving, strain towards each other through banks of earth, swim from the ends of the world, circle the heavens until they meet, lose themselves in each other, conceive in holy mystery, to come forth later before astonished eyes: in the springtime or a flower, a human soul or in the souging of green branches ...

So they, too, pressed against each other after long yearning, after days of torment, after long, grey, empty days, until they found each other and fell into each other's arms with an identical cry of desire, clasping each other as powerfully as pines uprooted by a storm and tossed together, devastated, embrace in desperation with all their might and sway, struggle and reel until they fall together to a terrible death.

The night shielded and cocooned them, so that fate could run its course ...

Partridges began to call each other somewhere in the darkness, so close that a whole covey could be heard approaching; a quick rustling, like wings readied for flight, beating against the snows, then individual peevish voices rent the silence. From the village, seemingly nearby, the loud though muffled crowing of cockerels rang out.

'It must be late,' she whispered anxiously.

'Midnight's far off yet – they crow when the weather turns.'

'A thaw's coming.'

'True enough, the snow's soft.'

Somewhere close, from behind the stone heap under which they were sitting, the hares began to bleat and chase each other, romping as though at a wedding party, until a whole drove chased past and they shrank back in fright.

'Little sods are mating and too excited to notice a thing. Spring's coming.'

'I thought it was some wild beast ...'

'Quiet, hey, get down!' he whispered in a frightened voice.

They pressed close to the stone heap in silence. Long slinking shadows began to emerge from the darkness, brightened by the snow's reflection – creeping slowly, stealthily, then vanishing completely, as though they'd sunk into the ground. Eyes shone like glow-worms in the thickets, barely half a field off, but soon they stole away and melted into the dark, then suddenly a hare's brief, painful, dying scream rang out, followed by brisk pattering, scuffling and grunting, a grisly din, the crunch of crumpled bones, a menacing growl, and once more a deep, disquieting silence reigned all around.

'Wolves have ripped a hare apart.'

'Lucky they didn't track us down!'

'We're downwind, so they didn't catch the scent.'

'I'm frightened ... Let's be off now ... I'm freezing.' She shivered.

He took her in his arms and warmed her with such kisses that both of them soon forgot the whole world. Each flung an arm tight round the other's waist and followed whatever path wound along beneath their feet; they walked swaying from side to side, like trees heaving with blooms and rippling softly amid the hum of bees ...

They were silent, with only the murmur of kisses, sighs, passionate cries, the muffled throb of elation and the joyful beating of their hearts surrounding them like the trembling glow of fields in spring. They were like the plains blooming in springtime, submerged in bright echoes of joy. Like opening buds, their eyes breathed in the same sweltering gusts as a hot sunlit meadow with its quivering fresh-grown grass, the shimmer and glitter of brooks, the faint cry of birds. Their hearts beat in unison with this holy earth and their glances fell like heavy clusters of abundant apple blossom. Their quiet words, few and meaningful, surged from the core of their being like shoots bursting from a tree on a May morning. Their sighs were like breezes caressing the sprouting corn, and their souls like a spring day, sunny as the rising blades of wheat, filled with the warbling of larks, with sparkling sunshine and souging breezes, brilliant greenery and the irrepressible joy of existence ...

Then they'd fall suddenly silent, stop short in some shadow, as when a cloud blocks the sun and the world quietens and darkens, lost for a moment in sorrow and fear ...

But they quickly shook off their speechlessness; their gladness blazed like a fire, nuptial music rang in their souls, setting happiness on such powerful wings and urging such flight that unwittingly they burst out in spontaneous ecstatic singing ...

They swayed to the rhythm of their voices, which seemed to rise on rainbow wings and with a starry, feverish rush of sound, spilled into the dead and empty night.

Completely oblivious now, they strode ahead, pressed together unresisting, lost in each other and heedless, drunk on a supernatural force of feeling that raised them to the heights and burst out in confused, chaotic, almost wordless song ...

A wild and riotous song that flowed in a torrent from their overflowing hearts and flooded the whole world with a triumphant cry of love ...

And flamed like a burning bush in the chaos of gloom and the havoc of night ...

And sometimes like the heavy, shattering rumble of waters, breaking icy chains ...

Now barely audible, it chimed softly, like corn swaying in the sunshine ...

The golden chains of sound snapped, scattering on the wind and dragging heavily along the strips; now they were only the cries of night, at times a helpless sob or forsaken call, the voice of loss and fear ...

And in the gloomy silence, they died away.

But a moment later, like frightened birds, they shot towards the sun in frenzied flight, while their hearts surged upwards with such force, so swept up in everything that they burst into a blinding hymn of rapture, a prayerful hymn of all the earth, the immortal cry of existence.

'Jagna!' he whispered in amazement, as though surprised to see her at his side.

'I'm here!' she replied, though tearful and subdued.

They found themselves on a path skirting the length of the village behind the barns, but on the Boryna side now.

All at once, Jagna began to cry.

'What's up?'

'How do I know? ... Something got me started and I can't help it.'

He was greatly alarmed; they sat down on some jutting quoins at the foot of a barn and, pulling her close, he put his arms around her and she clung to his chest like a child, staring somewhere into herself, and the tears dripped from her eyes like dew from flowers. Antek wiped them with his hand, and then his sleeve, but still they went on falling.

'Are you frightened?'

'As if! It's just there's something quiet growing inside me, like death were standing at my side, then something's snatching and carrying me up so's I'd like to hook on to the sky and sail away into the world with the clouds.'

He didn't reply. They both fell silent; something suddenly darkened in them, some shadow passed over their souls, muddying their brightness, piercing them with a strangely painful longing that made them cling to each other all the more, search all the more for some refuge in each other, strain through each other all the more towards some longed-for world ...

The wind rose and the trees swayed fearfully, showering them with wet snow; the dense billowing clouds suddenly began to disintegrate and flee in all directions, and a low tremulous moan floated across the snows.

'Time to head back, it's late already,' she whispered, half rising.

'Don't worry, they're still up and about. There are voices on the road, probably leaving the Kłqbs.'

'I left my milking pails – the cows'll break their legs on 'em.'

They fell silent at the sound of voices, close by and then fading; but to one side somewhere, as though on the same path, snow crunched underfoot and some tall shadow loomed so clearly that they sprang to their feet.

'Someone's out there ... skulking just by the fence.'

'You're imagining things ... sometimes the clouds throw shadows like that.'

They listened for a long time, peering into the darkness.

'Come on, over to the hayrick – it's quieter there!' he whispered urgently.

They kept glancing anxiously about, stopping to listen, holding their breath, but all around was quiet and still as death. Approaching the hayrick cautiously, they slipped into the deep black opening, gaping just above the ground.

The world had darkened again. The clouds had gathered into an impenetrable thicket, the pale light had faded. It seemed the night had closed its eyes and fallen into a deep sleep; the wind had slipped away without a trace and an unnerving silence drifted even deeper, so that the trembling of trees weighed down by snow could be heard and, far, far away, the spluttering of water tumbling under the millwheels. After a long moment, again the crunch of snow came from the path: quiet stealthy steps, like the tread of a wolf, could be heard distinctly ... A shadow broke away from the walls and advanced, stooping, across the snow, coming nearer and nearer, looming larger, pausing constantly, then moving on again ... It circled the hayrick to the field side and crept up almost to the opening, where it listened hard for a long time ...

Then it made for the stile and disappeared under the trees ...

Quicker than a Hail Mary, the figure reappeared, dragging an enormous sheaf of straw. It paused an instant, listened, and sprang to the hayrick, stopping the hole with the sheaf ... A match flared and, in a flash, fire blazed along the straw, shook itself and flamed with a thousand tongues. A moment later it exploded in a blood-red sheet, sweeping one whole side of the hayrick ...

And Boryna, bowed over, pale as death, lay in wait, a pitchfork in his hand.

Meanwhile, inside, they realized at once what was happening: crimson flames began to jostle their way in and acrid smoke filled the den. They leapt up with a shout, beating the walls, not knowing a way out. They were frantic with fear and scarcely able to breathe when Antek, by some miracle, came upon a corner of the rick's cover. He tugged at it with all his might and tumbled over, bringing it to the ground. Before he could leap to his feet, the old man charged at him with the pitchfork to pin him down, but he missed and Antek jumped up and, before the old man could rally for a second thrust, he slammed his fists into Boryna's chest and fled.

Then the old man leapt to the hayrick, but Jagna too was gone; she'd slipped away and disappeared into the night. Beside himself with rage, he began to roar, 'Fire! Fire!' as he ran around the hayrick with his pitchfork, looking like a fiend against the blood-red blaze, for the fire had engulfed the whole rick and was rampaging noisily, hissing and surging higher in a terrible pillar of flames and smoke.

People began to arrive at a run, shouts spread through the village. Someone rang the alarm, fear snatched at every heart, and the glow intensified while the fire waved its fiery sheet of flame in all directions, raining a torrent of red sparks on to the buildings nearby and over the entire village.

CHAPTER 12

Even the clearest head would be hard pressed to recall or tell what had happened in Lipce that memorable night; the village was in uproar, like an anthill that some ne'er-do-well had poked with a stick.

Day had barely broken and people were rubbing their eyes clear of sleep's mist. All were so keen to make for the scene of the fire that many said their prayers on the way while racing along as though off to a fair.

The day rose heavy and so bleary that its usual brightest point was still as gloomy as dawn. The snow came down in great wet flakes, eclipsing the world in a glazed and shivering, sopping sheet, but no one paid any mind to the sleet. Gathering from all corners of the village, they stood at the site of the fire for hours on end, sifting yesterday's doings in low voices, and pricking up their ears to learn anything new.

Quite a hubbub was stirring as more and more folk arrived and were already clustering at the fences. The farmyard was packed, and such a crowd thronged beside the hayrick that the snows glowed red from the women's dresses.

The rick was burnt to a cinder, in smithereens, with only two posts left jutting out from the coals like a pair of scorched blackened logs. On the roofs of sties and sheds the thatch had been ripped away to the timbers and tossed about so that all the track and land for half a field around was scattered with singed rushes, shattered battens, singed straw, half-charred wood and all manner of scorched debris.¹

The snow fell without ceasing and slowly covered everything in a glistening blanket, melting here and there over hidden still-glowing embers. Streams of black smoke gushed sporadically from the heaps of straw strewn everywhere and blazes of pale hissing flames erupted, but the men soon jumped on them with pike poles, stamping them out with their clogs, beating them with sticks and heaping them with snow.

They were just dragging apart a smouldering heap when one of them, most likely a Kłab boy, hooked out a scorched rag and lifted it high.

'Jagna's apron!' yelled Koziof's wife with derision, for it was common knowledge by now what had happened.

'Rootle around, boys, maybe you'll pull out some trews!'

'Nay! He got 'em out in one piece, though he might've lost 'em along the road.'

'The lasses have looked already – someone must have got there first.'

'Take it back to Hanka,' they said, bursting out in laughter.

'Quiet, you loudmouths, eh! Out to have fun and snigger over someone else's misfortune!' shouted the angry Soltys. 'Get on home, you women! What are you standing about for? You've wagged your tongues enough.' He darted forwards to disperse them.

'Keep out of our business and mind your own that you're meant for!' Kozłowa shouted so vehemently that the Soltys just looked at her, spat and went off to the farmyard. No one moved even an inch; the women began to shuffle the apron with their clogs, inspecting it and conferring in quiet, horrified voices.

'Her kind should be banished with a broom, like a witch!'² said Kobusowa loudly.

'No question! It's her fault! All of it!' Sikora's wife broke in.

'Indeed, thank the Lord the whole village didn't go up in smoke!' whispered Sochowa.

'True, it were a miracle, a real miracle!'

'There were no wind, thank goodness, and they saw in time.'

'And someone went ringing the bell, because the village were barely at first sleep.'³

'It were the bear-keeper from the inn who saw them first, by all accounts.'

'Ah no, m'dears! Boryna himself caught them in the hayrick and had just chased 'em off when fire broke out ... I marked something was up at the Kłabs' yesterday, when both of them cleared off at the same time.'

'Seems he's had his eye on them for a while now.'

'Indeed! My boy was telling me that he'd been pacing the road outside Kłab's all day yesterday, on the watch,' pronounced Kobusowa, under her breath.

'Antek started the fire out o' spite, clear as day.'

'Didn't he threaten he would?'

'The whole village knew of it.'

'It were bound to end that way!' Kozłowa chimed in.

In another group of older housewives, all manner of rumours were being whispered, albeit more quietly and gravely.

'Seems the old man gave Jagna such a beating she's lying ill at her mother's ... did you know?'

'Oh yes! He'd thrown her out by daybreak, they say, and chucked her chest after her with all her stuff,' threw in Balcerek's wife, silent until then.

'Don't go blathering any old thing. I've just been to the house, the chest is standing in its place,' Płoszka's wife protested. 'I said at the wedding it would end this way,' she took up more loudly.

'What next, my Jesus, what next!' moaned Sochowa, clasping her head.

'What do you mean, "what next"? They'll lock him up and that's that.'

'Serves him right: the whole village could've burnt down!'

'I was fast asleep and here comes Luka, who'd been running about with the bear-keepers, banging at the window shouting, "Fire!" Jesus, Mary, it's bright red at the windows, like someone's chucked a firebrand at the panes, so I'm already scared stiff ... and then the church bell goes ... people shouting ...' Płoszkowa began to recount.

'Soon as they said Boryna's was on fire, it struck me right off it were Antek's doing,' another interrupted her.

'Oh, give over; you go on as though you saw it with your own eyes.'

'Whether I did or not, it's what everyone's saying ...'

'Back at carnival Jagustynka was already going on about it ...'

'It'll be into the stocks and off to the clink, for sure.'

'And what can they do to him? Did anyone see it? Any witnesses? Well?' Balcerkowa declared, since she was the village litigant and fancied she knew the law.

'Did the old man not catch him?'

'He did, but not in the act, and even though he saw the fire go up, he can't be a witness, with being his father and them on bad terms, and all.'

'It's for the law to settle, not us, but if anyone's guilty before God and other folk, it's that bitch Jagna. Am I wrong?' again Balcerkowa raised her harsh voice.

'True! For sure! Such vileness, such a sin!' they whispered more quietly, huddling together and listing her transgressions, one after another.

The chattering grew louder and louder as the condemnations of Jagna grew more and more ferocious, reporting everything she'd done and much she hadn't: anything one of them had heard some time or made up of her own accord; all ancient injuries and envies smouldering in their souls; and a hailstorm of nicknames, fabrications, nasty threats, hateful words and wrathful anger flew, so that, had Jagna appeared at that moment, they would surely have hurled themselves upon her with their fists.

Meanwhile, a huddle of men debating more calmly turned upon Antek no less relentlessly. Anger slowly mounted in every heart, a deep, grim indignation swayed the crowd, flashed like lightning in their eyes, and more than one fist was raised in threat, ready to fall. Many a harsh word was barked out, hard as stone, until even Mateusz, who had defended him at first, declared eventually:

'He must have lost his head, to dare do such a thing!'

But the furious blacksmith leapt at this and began to expound to the peasants how Antek had long been blustering about a torching, that the old man had been well aware of it and kept watch, nights on end.

'I'd swear he did it, and besides there are witnesses who'll testify. There must be punishment for such, there must! Wasn't he always in cahoots with the farmhands, didn't he egg 'em on against their elders and betters, didn't he lead 'em astray? I can tell you which ones, I know, I'm even looking at 'em, listening to me right now and they dare to stand up for one like him,' he yelled threateningly. 'That kind are a plague that blight the whole village, should be thrown in the clink, off to Siberia. Beat him with sticks like a mad dog, for is it not enough of an insult to God – with his own stepmother – without starting a fire to boot! It's a miracle the whole village didn't go up!' he yelled with such passion you might have wondered at his motives.

Roch, standing to one side with Kłab, noted it and said:

'You're very hot against him when just yesterday you were drinking with him at the tavern.'

'Anyone's an enemy to me who could've ruined the whole village!'

'And yet the squire's no enemy of yours!' Kłab threw in gravely.

The blacksmith shrieked back at them, others started yelling, and he strode about among the people, goading them on, inciting them to revenge, laying unheard-of crimes at Antek's door, until the already outraged folk, thoroughly stirred up and agitated, began to cry loudly to fetch the arsonist, clap him in chains, deliver him to the law. Others, with hotter heads, began to look for sticks and were all for running and dragging him out of the house, and giving him a beating he'd remember to the end of his days! Especially those whose ribs had been counted more than once by Antek's cudgel.

The uproar grew, with shouts, threats, swearing and such confusion that the crowd milled and flailed about like a spinney lashed by a gale. It began to sway, beating in waves against the fences, pushing against the gates and pouring into the road. In vain did the Voyt spring up to pacify them, in vain did the Soltys and the elder villagers reason and exhort; their voices were lost in the infernal din and they were caught up and swept away with the rest. No one listened or heeded their words; everyone butted in, roaring and yelling their heads off, until all seemed in the grip of some frenzied storm of revenge ...

All at once, Kozłowa began to push to the front and shriek at the top of her lungs:

'Drag out both the guilty ones, both of 'em! Punish 'em both for the fire!'

The women, especially the labourers among them and all the poorest wretches, took their cue from her and, bellowing, dishevelled, completely beside themselves, yelled alongside her in a swarming, roaring stream that surged through the crowd. A clamour and screeching resounded in the narrow yard, for everyone was squeezing in at once, everyone shouting, everyone waving their fists, forcing their way forward, as their eyes flashed threateningly and a confused wild furor pulsed like a babble of turbulent water, as if a voice of common anger had engulfed all hearts in its flames. They crowded thicker and faster, when suddenly those at the front began to shout:

'The priest is coming, bringing the Lord Jesus! The priest!'

Jerked back as though at the end of a leash, the crowd reeled and pitched on to the road, hesitating, then scattered a little and quietened until, now completely silent, the people fell to their knees and bowed their bared heads ...

For the priest was approaching, carrying the viaticum from the church, bringing the Lord; Ambrozy went ahead with a lighted lantern, ringing a bell ...

He passed by swiftly, so they spied him but dimly, in a thick flurry of snow as though through a frozen pane, as they began to get up from their knees.

'He's going to Filipka. She caught such a chill in the forest last night she's been gasping since dawn and they say she won't last till evening.'

'And they've summoned him to Bartek at the sawmill ...'

'Has he fallen ill?'

'What, didn't you know? A tree crushed him so bad that probably the man'll not pull through ...' someone whispered as they glanced after the priest. A few of the matrons set off in procession after him and a horde of boys raced down a short cut by the pond to the mill. The rest, meanwhile, stood helpless as a flock of sheep when a dog has suddenly headed them off. All their anger had vanished, that powerful rush had subsided, the babble ceased, and they appeared to have woken from a deep sleep. Shifting from foot to foot, they scratched their heads, muttering vaguely, and since more than one was ashamed, they just spat, the men pulled down their caps and slunk from the crowd, which had spilled like water along the road and flowed away, dispersing slowly among the yards and houses. Only Kozłowa was left, still ranting loudly despite everything, and threatening Jagna and Antek, but seeing that everyone had retreated, she cursed aloud to ease her anger, squabbled with Rocho, who'd told her a home truth, and went off to the village, until at last no one remained except those guarding the embers in case the fire revived.

The blacksmith, too, was left in the yard, but so maddened by what had happened that he said nothing. He hung about restlessly, prying into corners and shooing away Łapa, who kept barking and darting at him ...

Boryna, meanwhile, did not appear even once that whole time. They said he'd buried himself in his quilt and was sleeping. Only Józka, her eyes swollen with crying, would peer out at the people in front of the house and hide again, so that Jagustynka had to manage the household herself, but the old lady was a wasp that day too, as barbed and aloof as could be, so they were loath to ask her anything when the reply would sting like nettles.

But at noon sharp, the notary arrived with the gendarmes and they began to document the site and probe the cause of the fire, so the rest of the people scattered in every direction, of course, so as not to be drawn into testifying.

The roads suddenly emptied almost completely. True, the snow was tumbling down, wetter than ever, for it began to melt before even touching the ground and covered everything with sludge, whereas, inside, the cottages buzzed like a beehive, for an unexpected holiday seemed to have come to Lipce. Hardly anyone did a thing or remembered their chores, so that cows lowed at their empty mangers while everyone everywhere busily debated, slipping from house to house; the women darted about, wagging their tongues, rumours circled like crows from chimney to chimney, while inquisitive faces peered from windows, doors and over fences, waiting to see if the gendarmes would take Antek away!

Curiosity and impatience grew from hour to hour, but nothing was known for certain, for whatever snippet someone brought breathlessly, that they'd gone to fetch Antek already, for instance, someone else would contradict, swearing that he'd beaten up the gendarmes, broken free of his fetters and made off, while others talked yet other nonsense.

One thing was certain, that Witek had rushed off to the tavern for vodka and smoke was billowing from Boryna's chimney, from which they inferred that a meal was being prepared for the gendarmes. But evening came and the Voyt's britchka left with notary and gendarmes, but no Antek! Astonishment and dismay seized the village as everyone had been sure he'd be taken, shackled, off to jail. They pondered and deliberated in vain over what the old man might have said in evidence. Only the Voyt and Soltys knew, but they weren't going to say a thing, so curiosity swelled beyond measure and the most incredible speculations ran rife ...

The night darkened slowly and grew quiet. The snow stopped falling and there looked to be a ground frost, for though great dark clouds were chasing across the sky, high between them a star would sparkle suddenly here and there, and a sharp gust would clutch the softened snows, so that they crunched underfoot. Lights glimmered in the cottages and people gathered before the hearth in crowded rooms, calm now after a long day's agitations, but still busy spinning notions and conjectures!

There was no lack of subject matter, after all, for if they hadn't taken Antek away, and if he wasn't the one who'd started the fire, then who had? It couldn't possibly be Jagna, no one would give that idea credence, nor the old man – that thought did not occur to anyone!

So they groped about blindly, completely unable to find a solution to the tiresome puzzle ... In all the cottages they talked of it, but no one uncovered the truth of it, and only one thing emerged from all these deliberations: that anger towards Antek had subsided and even his enemies fell silent, while his friends, like Mateusz, again raised voices in his defence. On the other hand, a grim hostility grew towards Jagna, even to the horrifying point of terrible, mortal sin. The women lashed out fit to drag her over the sharpest briars, not leaving a patch of skin unscathed! Dominikowa also came in for a hefty drubbing ... all the more resentful, because no one knew what was happening to Jagna, since the old woman chased the curious from her threshold like irksome dogs.

But all were equally united in one thing – a heartfelt sympathy for Hanka, whom they sincerely pitied. Early that very evening, Kłębowa and Sikorowa had called in with a kind word and a bundle of things.

So passed that long and memorable day, and the next morning everything returned to its former course – curiosity died away, anger cooled, indignation abated and subsided. Everybody resumed their own daily round, putting their shoulders to the yoke and bearing their lot as God had commanded, patiently and without muttering.

Talk of the events continued certainly, here and there, but less often and half-heartedly, for everyone had their own cares to put first and the troubles that each day brought.

March came, bringing almost intolerable weather. The days were dark and gloomy, lost in such squalls of rain, then wet snow, that it was hard to poke a nose out of doors. The sun seemed to vanish in those green-tinged, low swirling clouds, with not a glimmer appearing for even the blink of an eye. The snows melted slowly or softened into a mouldering mess in the bluster. Water collected in the furrows, swamping the lowlands and farmyards, while at night the frosts frequently took hold so that it was hard to stay upright on the icy roads and paths.

The foul weather drove the fire from memory more quickly, especially since neither Boryna nor Antek nor Jagna troubled human eyes. It slipped into oblivion like a stone into the depths where the water briefly ruckles above it, ripples, fractures, swirls and gives a murmur, then flows calmly on again.

So the days went by until Shrove Tuesday.

Since it was something of a holiday, the last of the season, from early morning there was considerable bustling throughout the cottages. Rooms were given a quick sweep and from almost every homestead someone would be off to town for this or that – meat, in the main, or a piece of sausage at least, or bacon. Only the poorest had to make do with salted potatoes and herring – taken on credit from the Jew.

The well-to-do houses had been frying doughnuts since breakfast, so that despite the wet weather, the smell of hot dripping, roast meat and other, even more mouth-watering aromas would waft through the whole village.

The bear-keepers trailed from house to house again, performing, so that the lads' shouts sounded constantly in every direction ...

In the evening after supper, there was music in the tavern to which anyone feeling lively with a spring in their step made haste, ignoring the weather, which had been sleeting since dusk. They threw themselves into the fun, their last chance before the great fast. Mateusz played the fiddle; Pietrek, Boryna's farmhand, accompanied him on a pipe; and Contrary Jasiek beat time.

You never saw such carousing, far into the night, until the church bell rang midnight to mark that carnival was over. Then all musical voices fell silent, the dancing stopped, flagons and glasses were hurriedly emptied, and folk quietly dispersed, until only Ambrozy was left, drunk as usual, for it was his custom to linger, crooning, in front of the tavern.

Only in Dominikowa's cottage did the light shine until late, to the second crowing, they said, as the Voyt and Soltys were sitting there, making peace between Jagna and Boryna. The village was long asleep and the world engulfed in silence, for the rain had ceased from midnight or so, and still they were deep in conference.

In Antek's house alone was there neither stillness nor peaceful sleep, nor a merry Shrove Tuesday.

God alone knows, and no human tongue can tell, what went on in Hanka's soul throughout those long days and nights, from the moment when Antek met her outside the cottage at the time of the fire and forced her back inside.

Indeed, she'd learned the whole story from Weronka that very night.

Then her soul died within her from the agony of it and she lay like a naked corpse, terrible to behold. For the first two days she barely moved from her distaff, yet she didn't spin a thing and simply moved her hands unconsciously, like a person in a deathly coma, staring with empty smarting eyes into herself, into the sad storm of sorrows within her, the miserable chaos of burning

tears, wrongs and injustices. All that time she did not sleep, or eat, and hardly knew what was happening around her, oblivious even to the children's cries, until Weronka took pity on her and busied herself with the children and the old man, who, to cap it all, had fallen ill now after his foray into the forest and lay on the bench by the stove, groaning quietly.

Antek, too, was practically absent. He left immediately at dawn and returned late at night, ignoring both her and the children. She could not utter even a single word to him, she could not manage it; her soul was so engulfed in grief, it seemed hard as stone.

At last, on the third day, she woke up somehow, roused as though from a terrible sleep, but so changed that a completely different woman seemed to rise out of that deathly numbness. Her face was grey, ashen, furrowed, years older, and set hard as though someone had carved it from wood. Only her eyes blazed, bright and dry, her lips firmly pursed, and the flesh had fallen away from her utterly so that her clothes hung from her as though from a peg.

Hanka came to life again, but was transformed also inside, for though her former soul seemed turned to dust, yet she felt a strange, unknown power, a stubborn will to live and fight, and a proud certainty that she would prevail and overcome everything.

She fell upon the children, who were whimpering pitifully, drawing them to her and practically smothering them with kisses, and together they burst into long, sweet floods of tears, which gave her much relief and brought her fully to her senses.

After quickly tidying the cottage she went to Weronka to thank her for her goodness of heart and to ask forgiveness for her past faults. They soon made up, which surprised her sister not at all, though the only thing she couldn't fail to mark was that Hanka did not complain of Antek, did not rail against him, never bemoaned her fate; no, it was as though these things were long dead and forgotten, except that finally she said firmly:

'I feel like a widow now, so I've got to take charge of the children and everything else myself.'

Soon, that very day, late in the afternoon, she went to the village to see the Kłabs and other friends, and to find out what was happening with Boryna ... for she well remembered his words on parting.

But she didn't go to see him straight away; she waited a few days, hesitating to appear so quickly after all that had come to pass.

It wasn't until the following Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, that without even preparing breakfast, she spruced herself up as best she could, left the children with Weronka and prepared to go out.

'Where are you off to so early?' Antek asked.

'To church, it's Ash Wednesday,' she replied unwillingly and evasively.

'Are you not making breakfast?'

'Why don't you go off to the tavern? Maybe the Jew will give you some on credit,' she blurted.

He leapt to his feet as though someone had struck him, but she ignored him and left. Hanka didn't fear his shouting any more, or his bursts of anger. He seemed such a stranger, so distant, that she was herself surprised by it, and though sometimes something flickered in her like a final tiny flame of long-gone fondness, like trampled embers heaped over with sorrows, she firmly extinguished them with the force of remembered and forever-mourned wrongs.

People were just going out to church when she turned on to the poplar-lined road.

The day had become strangely bright and fair. The sun shone direct from the east, the night's hard frost had not yet melted in the thaw and thatched roofs dripped with strings of glittering beads. The roads and ditches, washed with icy water, shone like mirrors. Frosted trees sparkled and flashed in the sunlight, casting silver threads to the ground. The pure blue sky, full of small milky clouds floating in the sunshine, was like a field of blossoming flax into which a flock of sheep had waded, their white backs barely visible, and the air drifted clean, crisp and so fresh it was a delight to breathe. The whole world was cheerful: puddles gleamed; the burnished snowdrifts glowed golden; shouting gleeful children slid enthusiastically along the roads; here and there an old man would stand against a wall, basking in the sun; even the dogs barked joyfully, chasing flocks of marauding crows. Everywhere seemed marvellously flooded in serene sunlight and almost spring-like warmth.

In the church, meanwhile, a bitter chill enveloped Hanka and a deep, prayerful silence. A Low Mass had already begun at the high altar, and a crowd of folk absorbed in their devotions, sunk in prayer, packed the nave, awash with streams of light, while latecomers were still arriving.

But Hanka did not squeeze in among the people. She went to a side aisle, completely empty and so gloomy that only an occasional yellow flash of gold showed in the meagre, icy streaks of light. She wanted to be alone, her own soul one to one with God. Kneeling at the altar of the Assumption, she kissed the ground, put her hands together and, gazing into the sweet face of the merciful Mother, she immersed herself in prayer.

Here at last, all her sorrows spilled over. She poured out her soul with all its harrowing hurts at the holy feet of the Lady of Consolation, and, in deepest humility and absolute confidence, she made a sincere confession. Before the Mother and Lady of all the people, she repented all her faults, for she was surely sinful, since the Lord Jesus had punished her this way – sinful! Unhelpful to others, for one thing, conceited, for another, and quarrelsome and slovenly besides; she liked to eat well and laze about and was sluggish in serving God – sinful she was. She cried inside feverishly, bleeding regret and repentance; it was a wonder her heart didn't burst. She pleaded for mercy, begging compassion for Antek's grave sins and trespasses, like a small bird that, fleeing for its life, flaps its wings, beating them against a windowpane and chirping piteously for someone to save it.

She shook with crying and burned with the fervour of her pleas and begging. A stream of prayers and tears poured from her soul as from an open wound, spilling blood-stained pearls over the cold floor.

The Mass ended and all the people, full of contrition and often in tears, moved towards the altar rail to bow their heads humbly to receive the ashes, which the priest, reciting loud penitential prayers, scattered over them as they knelt.

Not waiting for the end of the rite, Hanka went outside, feeling much strengthened and with complete trust in God's help.

She replied to people's greetings with her head held high, dauntless among the curious glances, and boldly, though trembling a little, she turned into Boryna's farmstead.

My God, it was so long since she had set foot here, having since only circled pitifully from a distance like a dog. Now she swept her eyes affectionately over the house and buildings, the farmyard and each little tree sparkling in the hoar frost, as familiar as though it had grown out of her own heart and was her own flesh and blood. Her soul felt so glad inside, she was almost ready to kiss this holy ground. She'd barely stepped on to the porch when Łapa threw himself at her with such a joyful yelp that Józka, peering into the porch, stopped in amazement, scarcely believing her own eyes.

'Hanka! Lordy! Hanka!'

'Yes, yes, it's me – don't you recognize me then? Is Father home?'

'Yes, indeed, they're in ... Oh, but you've come ... Hanka!' And the good little lass burst into tears, kissing her hands as if Hanka were her own mother.

Boryna, meanwhile, on hearing her voice, came out himself and led her inside. She fell at his feet in tears, moved at the sight of him and the memories springing from every corner of the dear old house. She quickly calmed down, for the old man began to ask after the children and lamented with pity that she was wasting away. She told him everything, hiding nothing, alarmed at the change that had taken place in him. He'd aged greatly, grown thin as a reed and stooped markedly; only his face remained as before, even more stubborn and grim.

They talked a long time, not once mentioning Antek or Jagna, both wary of touching those sensitive spots. After an hour, when Hanka was gathering herself up to leave, the old man ordered Józka to prepare bundles of whatever there was to hand, until Witek had to load it into the sleigh, for she couldn't have managed it all herself. On parting he even gave her a few coins for salt and said:

'Come more often, every day if you like. There's no knowing what might happen to me, so keep an eye on the house, and Józka has a soft spot for you, besides.'

And with that she left, pondering her father-in-law's words along the way, so that she paid little attention to Witek's tales of how the Voyt and Soltys came every day, urging the old man to make peace with Jagna, that the master had even gone along to see the priest with Dominikowa, who had sat up until late last night with the old man. On he chattered, telling anything he could think of just to gratify her.

In the cottage, she found Antek fixing his shoe by the window; he didn't even glance at her until he saw Witek and the bundles and retorted crossly:

'I see you've been out cadging ...'

'Well, since I've sunk to becoming a beggar, I must live on other people's pity.'

When Witek had left, he burst out angrily:

'I damn well said you're not to go to Father's!'

'He asked me himself, so I went. He offered the stuff himself, so I took it. I'm not going to die of hunger or have my children do without since you're not bothered!'

'Take it back right now, I don't need anything from him!' he shouted.

'But I do and so do the children.'

'I'm telling you, take it back or I'll take it back myself and shove it down his throat! He can choke on his charity, d'you hear! I'll chuck it all out the door!'

'Just you try! Just you touch it and I'll show you!' she snapped, grabbing a little mangle, ready to defend her things to her last breath, so fierce and infuriated that he shrank back, confused by this unexpected resistance.

'He bought you cheap, with a bit o' bread like a dog,' he muttered darkly.

'And you, you sold us and yourself even cheaper, for a scrap o' Jagna's skirt!' she yelled without thinking, so that he recoiled as though stabbed with a knife. Hanka, who seemed to have gone stark raving mad, awash with painful memories, exploded in a sudden torrent of every hidden, stored-up wrong he'd ever done her. She spared him nothing, not a single crime, not a single sin did she overlook, her words flailing him with such frenzy that, if she could, she would surely have killed him on the spot!

He took fright at her fury. Something yanked at his chest; he hung his head and didn't know what to say. His anger fell away and a bitter, biting shame flooded his soul, so that he grabbed his cap and fled the cottage.

For a long time he couldn't fathom what had come over her, but like a maltreated dog, he tore off without thinking – as he did every day ...

From that terrible moment of the fire something dreadful had been forming within him, as though something had snapped inside. He didn't go to work, though the miller had sent for him several times, and just loitered round the village, sat drinking in the tavern, constantly brooding upon ever-bloodier vengeance and now seeing nothing beyond it, so that he couldn't care less if

they were accusing him of arson at his father's.

'Just let someone say it to my face, let 'em dare!' he said to Mateusz at the tavern, out loud, so that people would hear.

He sold his last heifer to the Jew and drank the money away with his mates, as he was keeping company with all the village lowlives now: the likes of Bartek Kozioł, Filip from over the pond and Franek the miller's man had attached themselves to him, not to mention those villains, Gulbasowa's sons, who were always first up for rowdiness, prowling about the countryside in a gang, like wolves, with an eye out for what could be snaffled and bartered for booze at the Jew's. It was all the same to him what they were like, as long as they kept him company, since they fawned on him like devoted puppies, so that even though he thrashed them sometimes, he was quick to stand them a drink and stick up for them.

Together, they caused such a fracas round the village, such harassment and brawling, that every day complaints about them reached the Voyt, and even the priest.

Mateusz admonished him, but to no avail. In vain did Kłab, too, implore him for pure friendship's sake to steady himself and not bring about his own ruin; in vain did he reason with him. Antek did not listen, wouldn't be told, losing all restraint, drinking even harder and levelling threats at the whole village.

And so he hurtled towards his own destruction, as though down a steep hill, minding nothing and no one, while the village kept a keen and constant eye upon him. Though opinions varied as to the cause of the fire, seeing his present antics they grew increasingly outraged, and, with the blacksmith quietly goading them on all the time, even his former friends gradually distanced themselves; they steered clear of him, and were the first to impugn him loudly. But it was all the same to him; blinded by vengeance, he breathed that alone, fanning its embers until it exploded into flames.

And what's more, as if to spite everyone, he did not give up Jagna – driven by his love, or something else, God knows. They'd meet in Dominikowa's barn, behind her mother's back, of course, except that Szymek helped them willingly, probably hoping for Antek's help in courting Nastka.

Jagna went out to him unwillingly, always afraid. She'd lost all taste for love-making after her husband's whipping, of which she still bore the painful traces; but she also feared Antek and his threats that if she didn't answer every summons, he'd come to her house in broad daylight and beat her in front of everyone even more soundly than had Boryna.

Indeed, she'd no desire to spend time with her partner in crime, but held over the barrel by threats, out she came, like it or not.

Still, it didn't last long. On the Thursday following hard on Ash Wednesday, Szymek rushed into the tavern, pulled Antek aside and said that they'd just reconciled the old man and Jagna and she had already moved back in with him.

He was stunned by the news, which crashed down like a club on the crown of his head, for he'd last seen her yesterday at dusk and she'd said not a word!

'She hid it from me!' he thought, as though someone had tipped burning coals into his heart. Barely able to wait until evening, he hurried off. He prowled about his father's house a long time, watching and waiting by the stile, but she didn't show herself at all. In growing exasperation he brazenly tore out a picket from a fence and entered the farmstead ready for anything, determined even to go into the cottage. He was right on the threshold, his hand on the latch, when at the last moment he recoiled from the door; the memory of his father's face stood so vividly before his eyes that he backed off, frightened, shivering with terror. He couldn't pull himself together, and quietly, fearfully and furtively edged away.

Later he couldn't understand what had scared him, what had come over him, just like that time at the pond.

But over the days that followed, he didn't manage to see her either, even though he stood watching by the stile whole evenings at a time, lurking like a wolf.

Nor did he see her even on Sunday, though he lay in wait outside the church for ages.

Then he decided to go to vespers, sure he'd meet her there and find some way to speak with her.

He was rather late, as vespers had already begun. The church was full and so gloomy that the last of the day's grey streaks lingered only under the vault, while below, here and there, the flames of tapers glowed in the darkness. The people thronged and hummed like a river, swaying towards the high altar, which blazed with light. Pushing his way right to the sanctuary railing, he looked about a little, but didn't see Jagna or anyone from his father's household, whereas he caught frequent curious glances fixed on him and realized that he was attracting attention, as one neighbour whispered to another, pointing him out furtively.

It was the first Sunday of Lent and they'd begun to sing the Bitter Lamentations.⁴ The priest, dressed in a surplice, sat by the altar with a prayer book in his hand and glanced at him sternly from time to time. The organ rumbled poignantly and all the people sang as one, though occasionally the voices broke off, the organ ceased and from the organ loft, as though from beneath the heavens, echoed the plaintive clipped voice of the organist, reading meditations on the Passion of the Lord.

But Antek heard nothing; he slowly forgot why he'd come and where he was. The singing sank into his soul, cradling and caressing him so that he felt strangely weak. Overcome by drowsiness and a deep stillness, he felt himself sinking and floating towards something luminous. Whenever he came to and opened his eyes, he'd meet the eyes of the priest, trained always upon him, for he was taller than the others and visible from a distance, with a look so piercing that Antek turned his heavy head away and again forgot about everything; suddenly he started as the whole church rang out:

*'The Lord of heaven hangs crucified;
Weep for thy sins, O man! For them He died!'*

The cry seemed to spring from a single fathomless throat and burst forth with such plaintive force, such tearful moaning, that the walls themselves trembled, folk sprang up from their knees, the crowd seethed and all the voices thundered together, like a single soul, sobbing in repentance.

The hymn ended, but its long sad melancholy strains, the murmur of sobs, sighs and fervent prayers went on rippling through the church.

The service went on for some time yet, but Antek was completely conscious now. The drowsiness had gone, leaving a heavy, invincible sadness swelling and clinging to his soul, and but for the shame of it, he wouldn't have held back the tears that stung his eyes. He wanted to leave without waiting for the end – when suddenly the organ fell silent, the priest stood before the altar and began to preach.

People were pressing forwards, making it impossible even to think of leaving. Pushed up against the rails, he could barely move. Silence filled the church so that the priest's every word was clearly heard. He spoke of the Agonies of Christ, and when he'd finished, he started to admonish the sinners, waving his arms threateningly and casting looks at Antek, who was standing a little lower, right in front of him, unable to tear his eyes away, as though shackled and spellbound by the priest's burning glances ...

Soon cries began to escape the rapt, engrossed huddle of people, sighs of regret, here and there, or moans of the holy name, Jesus. The priest grew louder and more threatening, until he seemed to grow and expand before them, his eyes flashed like lightning. He raised his arms and his words fell upon their heads like stones and scorched their hearts like red-hot pokers – for he set about giving them all a lashing for their crimes and transgressions; their hardened sinning, their obliviousness to the commands of God and their endless quarrelling, brawling, drunkenness. He spoke so passionately that souls trembled in the torment of their sinfulness, all hearts wept in remorse, tears and murmurs of contrition rained like dew – then suddenly the priest leaned towards Antek and in a mighty voice denounced wayward sons burning down their own fathers' houses, seducers and sinners whom the eternal fire would not overlook nor human judgement fail to punish!

Struck with terror, all the people were suddenly silent. They held their breath, all eyes falling on Antek like a hailstorm, for they understood very well whom the priest was rebuking.⁵ while he stood upright, white as a sheet, barely breathing as the words boomed at him, as though the whole church were tumbling down. He looked about as though seeking help, but the crowd had thinned around him. He saw people with frightened grim faces edging away despite themselves, as though from some contagion. By now, the priest was shouting at the top of his voice, castigating him and calling him to repentance. Turning to the people, he stretched out his arms and enjoined them to beware such ruffians, to guard against them, to turn them from their doors, deny them food and drink and even a roof over their heads, to drive them away like lepers, for they tainted everything and defiled it, and if they did not mend their ways, did not make amends, did not atone – then pluck them out like stinging nettles and consign them to perdition!

Antek suddenly turned on his heel and walked slowly to the door, a path appearing instantly before him as people moved out of his way, while the priest's voice pursued him, flaying until the blood ran.

A desperate cry rang out in the church, but he didn't hear it; he marched straight ahead, quickly, so as not to fall down dead of the ordeal, to escape those lacerating eyes, that terrible voice.

He stumbled out and, barely thinking, made for the forest along the poplar road, pausing in fear from time to time and listening to the voice that constantly rang in his ears like a bell and pealed so hard it was a wonder his head didn't burst.

It was a dark and windy night. The poplars rocked and murmured. Sometimes a bough smacked against his head, then the wind would drop and a fine, miserable March rain whipped his face, but Antek was oblivious; he rushed on, frantic, terrified, full of unspeakable horror.

'It can't get any worse!' he whispered finally, stopping. 'He was right! He was right! Jesus, my Jesus!' he cried suddenly, clasping his head, for at that moment it was as though he'd perceived and understood his faults and sins, so that an absolutely monstrous sense of shame wrenched at his soul and ripped it to shreds.

He sat under a tree for a long time, staring into the night, caught up in the quiet, tremulous and harrowing music of the trees.

'It's his fault, all of it!' he shouted, convulsed with rage and hatred. All his old resentment sprang up again and all his wildest fancies of revenge boiled and tumbled like clouds racing across the sky.

'I'll not forgive him! I won't!' he howled, the old frenzy seizing him, so that he turned back sharply to the village.

The church was closed now, lights were on in the cottages, and here and there along the road he came across knots of people conferring, despite the cold and rain.

He headed for the inn, and spied a sizeable crowd through the window, but he didn't hesitate and went in boldly and, as though it were nothing at all, joined the largest group, meaning to greet his pals. One of them shook his hand, but the rest moved smartly away in every direction and hastily began to leave. Before he knew it, he was left almost alone, but for some old fellow sitting by the hearth and the Jew behind the bar.

He understood that he was the one who had chased everyone away; he swallowed that too, and asked for a vodka, then set down the glass unfinished and hurried out.

Wandering aimlessly around the pond, he stared at the bands of light slanting here and there from the windows on to the sodden snow and shining along the water that covered the ice.

Again Antek softened inside and his heart felt unspeakably heavy. He felt so alone, wretched and unhappy, and had such a need to be among people, to confide his troubles and simply sit before a fire, that he entered the first cottage he came to, the Płoszka's.

Everyone was there, but at his entrance they leapt up in dismay. Even Stacho didn't know what to say.

'You look as though I'd cut someone's throat!' he said quietly, and went on to someone else's, to the Balcereks', but they, too, gave him a frosty welcome, mumbling something or other, and no one even invited him to sit down.

He dropped in at a few more places; everywhere it was the same. So, as a last resort, to spare himself no pain or humiliation, he went to see Mateusz. He wasn't home, only old Golebowa, who immediately gave him the sharp end of her tongue, and cursed and chased him from the cottage like a dog.

Antek didn't say a word, or flare up in anger. All rage and any grasp of what was happening left him. Stumbling slowly into the night, he walked about the pond, or stopped here and there and looked at the village, submerged in the gloom, only its lit-up windows visible. He gazed in astonishment, as though he were seeing it for the first time, surrounding him with its low cottages that clung to the ground. It fenced him in on every side; he couldn't move or break free of these fences, orchards, lights! Unable to get his bearings, he felt that some irresistible force was grasping him by the neck and compelling him to the ground, bending him to the yoke and filling him with inexplicable dread.

He stared at the bright windows in deep dismay, for they seemed to be observing him, watching him, advancing on him with an endless chain, tightening it and shackling him, so that he couldn't move or shout, or flee. He huddled under a tree, utterly crushed, and listened as from the houses, from all the shadows, the fields, from the very sky, stern words of condemnation assailed him and the whole village seemed to turn on him.

'Rightly so! Rightly so!' he whispered in deepest humility from the bottom of his remorseful heart, struck with mortal fear and the power of the village.

The lights went out slowly, one after another – the village was falling asleep. Except for the rain drizzling and pattering upon the drooping trees and a dog barking somewhere, an unnerving quietness enveloped the world, when Antek's head suddenly cleared and he leapt to his feet.

'Priest spoke rightly ... told the truth as he sees it ... but I'll not back down, I'll not forgive if it damn well kills me!' he yelled ferociously, shaking his fist at the whole village and the entire world!

He pulled down his cap and headed for the tavern.

CHAPTER 13

Spring was in the air, though the miry days of March dragged on unabated and the weather was at its foulest – damp and chill and foggy. Every day it sleeted; every day such choppy rains lashed down there was no venturing out; every day dingy, dishevelled mists loitered in the fields and smothered any light, so that a dour, heavy twilight hung over the ground from dawn until dusk, and sometimes if the sun did peer out from behind the drab poplars, it was for barely a Hail Mary, and the soul scarcely had time to rejoice in a little brightness or the bones in a little warmth before new glooms descended, new gales picked up, new squalls and flurries bore down. Day after day crept in like a grubby hound, plastered in mud and whining with cold.

Gloomy beyond measure at this, folk were cheered and fortified only by the thought that there was but a week or two left of it to endure, and that spring would conquer and restore everything. Meanwhile, the sleet was constant and almost unbearable, leaking through roofs, lashing through walls and windows. It poured on every side so that you could hardly cope for water; it tumbled from the fields, the ruts were brimming, and roads glistened with swift-flowing streams. It flooded the fences and filled farmyards with quaggy puddles, and since more snow melted every day and the rains kept coming, the ground quickly thawed and loosened the ice. In places along the southerly side, there was such a mire they had to put planks down in front of cottages or line the way with straw.

The nights, meanwhile, were just as unbearable, everywhere rattling, wet and so sunk in darkness that often it seemed the light had gone for ever. Folk hardly bothered to light the fire in any cottage of an evening, for it was so tedious they went to bed at dusk. Windowpanes glowed only where women had gathered to spin and quietly drone the Bitter Lamentations and other plaintive hymns on the Lord's Passion, to the accompaniment of the wind, rain and sighing of trees beating against the fences.

It was no wonder, then, that Lipce seemed to have vanished in the thaw. The cottages could barely be distinguished from the sopping fields and rain-soaked world; almost invisible where they huddled in the dreary fog, they were wet through, blackened and thoroughly wretched, while fields, orchards, roads and sky were like a single livid whirlpool, so that there was no telling where they began and where they ended.

It was bitterly cold besides, and chilled to the marrow, so that you'd rarely see anyone on the road, only the constant rain pattering down, the winds sweeping through, the trees trembling. In the sadness and emptiness all around, the village was as quiet as though it had died. The only living voices were those of beasts lowing at empty mangers, or the squawk of hens from time to time, or the ganders who, separated from the geese sitting on their eggs, would honk raucously from the yards.

And as the days grew longer, the people grew more irked, for no one had work to do. Some were busy at the sawmill, a few carted wood from the forest for the miller, while the rest hung about the cottages or sat around with neighbours to get through the day somehow. The more foresighted set about mending ploughs or harrows or other farm tools, ready for spring to work the land, but it was hard and tedious labour, for everyone was hampered by the blustering weather and the troubles that occupied their hearts. The winter cereals suffered hard under these downpours and in places the lower fields seemed completely lost to frost. Many folk were coming to the end of the fodder for their animals and hunger was peering into the byres. In one cottage, the potatoes turned out to have frozen, disease lingered in another, while elsewhere folk were staring the preharvest days of scarcity in the eye.

Many a cottage saw a hot meal but once a day, with salt its only dressing¹ – and the trail of people heading to the miller's to borrow a bushel of flour in exchange for deferred hard labour grew, as he was a true extortioner, for no one had a grosz to spare or anything to take to town. Others went pleading to the Jew at the inn, to ask for a pinch of salt on the slate, a quart of groats or a loaf of bread!

Aye, a shirt's no great matter when the belly starts to natter!

So many needy folk were there, with no earnings to be had, the farmers themselves with nothing to do and the squire adamant that not a soul from Lipce would earn a grosz in the forest, unrelenting still despite all pleas, even though they went to him in delegation. Indeed, the misery of the hired hands and the poorer farmers deepened so that many a one thought himself lucky and thanked God if potatoes were all he had left, seasoned with salt and bitter tears!

And so with one thing and another, constant lamentations sprang up in the village, wrangles, feuds and brawls, for folk were suffering, dejected, unsure of tomorrow, tormented with cares, and hence always on the lookout for a chance to inflict on others the injury that ate away at them inside. Thus the cottages heaved with gossip, squabbling and castigation.

And then devil take it if disease did not descend upon the village, as was often the case anyway before spring – an unhealthy time, when stinking vapours rise from the thawing ground. Down swooped the pox, first off, like a hawk upon goslings, smothering the babes and sometimes taking older children. Even two of the Voyt's youngest could not be saved by the doctors they'd summoned and were taken to the graveyard. Next, agues, fevers and other maladies beset the elderly, so that in every other house someone was ailing and casting an eye towards the priest's byre, awaiting God's mercy – until Dominikowa could no longer keep up and treat them all. Then the cows began calving, and a woman or two gave birth, bringing yet more havoc and commotion to the village.

Beside themselves in the face of it all, folk watched for spring with growing impatience, for it seemed to everyone that if only the snow would melt, the ground thaw and dry, and the sun come out a little, they could get on to the fields with ploughs, and their troubles and worries would cease.

Yet everyone remarked that spring was slower in coming than in past years, for the rain went on pouring and the earth softened more slowly, and the waters subsided sluggishly and, even worse, the cows showed no sign of moulting, which meant that the winter would hold on longer.

Should a dry hour occur and the sun shine a little, people swarmed immediately in front of the cottages, heads upturned and scanning the skies longingly, guessing at whether it was set for a longer change. The old people crept out to sit against the walls and warm their feeble bones, and all the children ran shouting along the lanes, like colts set free on to the first grass.

What joy, rejoicing and laughter was there then!

In the sun, the whole world was aflame. Water everywhere blazed with light, the ditches seemed filled to the brim with melted sunshine, the roads were like molten gold and the pond with its rain-rinsed ice sparkled like a black tin basin, even the trees shimmered in the lingering dew. The fields, furrowed with streams, lay dumbfounded, dark and lifeless still, but breathing in warmth already and swollen with spring, full of glistening murmuring water. Here and there the glaring whiteness of any lingering snows shone like sheets of linen stretched out to bleach. The sky grew bluer and the misty distances emerged as though swathed in cobwebs, so that the eye flew far over immense fields to the dark lines of villages and the rims of forest, into that great wide world panting with joy. And so sweet was the breath of spring upon the air that a happy cry surged in human hearts, lifting souls and making folk long to soar into the sun like birds arriving somewhere from the east, basking in the clear air, and everyone stood glad before their cottages, chatting even with their enemies.

Quarrels were silenced then, feuds subsided, hearts were moved to kindness and merry cries flew about the village, filling homes with joy and the chirrup of voices on the balmy air.

Cottage doors were thrown wide open and windows unfastened to let some air into the chambers. The women brought their distaffs out to the earth benches and cradles were put out in the sun. From the open byres came the wistful roaring of beasts: the horses whinnied, tugging at their halters and straining towards the outdoors; the geese rushed from their eggs, outgobbling the ganders in the gardens; cockerels sat crowing on the fences; and dogs barked crazily along the roads, chasing in the mud with the children.

Folk stood in the farmsteads and squinted at the sun, gazing happily at the village as it wallowed in sunshine, windowpanes blazing. The women chatted with their neighbours across orchards, their voices carrying throughout the whole village, telling each other that someone had already heard a lark, that wagtails had been seen along the poplar road. Or then again, high under the clouds, someone spied a skein of wild geese, so that half the village ran on to the road to look, while someone else reported that storks had descended already on the marshes beyond the mill. This was dismissed, however, for it was barely the middle of March! And someone, a Kłab boy perhaps, brought the first sprig of liverwort and ran about the cottages with it, so that they all peered with wonder and marvelled greatly at the little white flower as though it were something sacred.

So deceptive was the warmth, folk believed it was the start of spring and that soon they'd set off for the fields with the plough. How much greater their alarm, then, at the sight of the suddenly overcast sky, how deep their sadness when the sun hid and a cold wind gusted, the brightness faded, the world darkened and a fine rain began to drizzle! ... From evening wet snow began to fall so heavily that in the space of a prayer or two the whole village and fields were grown white again ...

Everything returned to its former state so fast that in the new days of rains, downpours and muddy puddles, it seemed to folk those sunny hours had been but a fleeting dream.

So the time went by, in matters such as these, in joys, in sorrows and in longings, so it was little wonder that Antek's doings, Boryna's wedded life, someone's death or some other happening, fell like stones to the bottom of people's minds, for everyone had troubles aplenty of their own that were hard enough to manage.

The days went by relentlessly, swelling like waters flowing from a mighty sea with neither a clear beginning nor an end. On and on they went, so that barely had a body opened their eyes, barely looked about, barely made sense of it, when darkness fell again, it was night again, again a new dawn and a new day, with new troubles, and so on, over and over again – all so that God's will should be satisfied!

One day, in the very middle of Lent, the weather grew worse than ever, for despite only a fine rain drizzling, folk felt low as never before. They wandered about the village as though possessed, mournfully surveying a world so densely packed with great clouds that their swollen bellies rubbed along the trees. Sad it was, so wet, cold and gloomy everywhere that it made you want to cry with unremitting longing. No one was quarrelling or holding forth today. It was all the same to them, they wanted nothing more than a quiet corner to lie down in and forget everything.

The day was dour as a sick man's glance when he struggles to open his eyes and only vaguely takes in anything before falling back into a sickly torpor once more. Barely had the noonday bell rung when it darkened suddenly, a dull wind arose and dashed the rain against the blackened cottages.

There was no one on the quiet empty roads. The wind swept noisily over the mud and the rain splashed, as though someone were flinging heavy grain against the shaking trees and black walls, while the pond began to wrestle with the splitting ice, for again and again a crack and crash would be heard and the waters splashed over the banks with a cry.

It was on such a day, towards evening, when news spread round the village that the squire was felling the peasants' forest.

At first no one would give it credence, for since he hadn't been felling so far, why begin now, in mid March, when the ground was thawing and the sap beginning to rise?

Aye, there was work going on in the forest, but everyone was sure it must be other woodland tasks.

Whatever else he might be, no one thought the squire a fool.

Only a fool would float timber in March.

They'd no idea who'd spread this news, but there was uproar in the village all the same, so that doors were slamming and mud flying under clogs as they ran from cottage to cottage with the tidings, standing about the roads discussing it, gathering at the inn to mull it over and question the Jew, though that yellow scoundrel² denied it and swore he knew nothing. Already shouts were to be heard and wrathful words. The women were lamenting, indignation was swelling, and all the folk were seized at once with alarm, anger and fear.

Finally, old Kłab decreed that they must verify these tidings, and, ignoring the blustering weather, he sent his lads on horseback to the forest to cast an eye about.

They were away a long time, and there wasn't a cottage where someone wasn't watching the road they'd taken towards the forest. Darkness settled and still they had not returned. A turbulent silence fell upon the whole village, suppressed as yet, and ominous, its anger wreathing the soul like stinging smoke, for though no one yet believed it fully, everyone was sure the ill-omened news would be confirmed, with one person or another cursing and slamming the door as they went out to the road to watch and see if they were returning ...

Kozłowa, in the meantime, ran about inciting folk for all she was worth, yapping and swearing by all that was holy to anyone who'd listen that she'd seen it with her own eyes, that they'd already brought down a good half-volok of the peasants' wood. She appealed to Jagustynka, with whom she had become firm friends of late. True, the latter gave the nod to everything, relishing the commotion, and having now collected all kinds of snippets among the cottages, she bore them off to the Borynas.

They had just lit the lamp in the scullery. Józka and Witek were peeling potatoes and Jaguś was bustling about the evening chores. The old man came in a little later and Jagustynka set about telling him everything in detail, elaborating for good measure.

He made no reply and just said to Jagna:

'Take the shovel and run help Pietrek. The water's got to be drained from the garden, or it'll get into the potato pit. Get a move on, when I'm telling you!' he shouted.

Jagna muttered some objection, but he gave her such a mouthful that she jumped to it. He himself went into the yard to supervise, and time after time his angry voice could be heard now in the stable, now in the byre, now by the potato pit, so that you could hear it even inside the cottage.

'Is he always so contrary?' the old woman asked, raking the fire.

'Aye, always,' replied Józka, listening out anxiously.

And so it was, for since the day he'd made up with his wife, to which he'd agreed so fast that it took everyone by surprise, he had changed beyond recognition. Boryna had always been hard and slow to yield, but now he had turned to stone completely. He'd taken Jagna in without remonstrance, but now used her simply as a servant, which was what he considered her to be and treated her accordingly. All her cajoling, her beauty, even her anger or her so-called sulks and rages, with which women are wont to wage war against men, helped not one bit. He paid no attention to her, as though she were a stranger to him and not his rightful wife. He did not care what she got up to, though he must surely have known of her meetings with Antek. He did not even guard her, as though she were nothing to him at all. A few days after their reconciliation, he went off to town and did not return until the following day; village talk had it that he'd been to the notary's and others even hinted quietly that he'd surely taken back Jagusia's legacy. Indeed, no one knew the truth except for Hanka, who was in such favour now with her father-in-law that he confided everything to her and sought her advice, though she did not breathe a word to anyone. She looked in on the old man every day and the children now barely left the cottage, where they often slept over with grandfather, so highly did he favour her.

Boryna had somehow regained his health from that time. He no longer stooped and his glance was proud as ever, but he'd grown so ill-tempered, he would burst out in anger at the slightest provocation and was hard on everyone, downright insufferable, for whatever he put his hand upon had to buckle to the very ground and be just as he wanted, and if not, then woe betide!

For sure, he did no harm to anyone, but nor did he sow goodwill, oh no, as his neighbours knew all too well. He took everything into his own hands and did not let go, not for the space of a prayer. He guarded the storeroom keenly, and even more so his pocket, distributing everything himself and strictly ensuring that nothing be wasted. He was hard on everyone in the house, but particularly on Jagusia, for he never gave her a kindly word, put her to work as he would an idle horse and did not indulge her in anything, so that not a day went by without quarrels and the strap too was often put to work, if not something harder, indeed, for Jagna in turn was as if possessed by a demon of contradiction.

She gave in as give in she must, he had her captive, so what was she to do? Eating a husband's bread meant bending to a husband's will, but for every mean word she had ten of her own, for every shout of his she raised such a hue and cry, such merry hell, the whole village could hear. It was constant hell inside the cottage too, as though both had got a taste for it, each vying bitterly to get the better of the other, with neither willing to give way.

In vain did Dominikowa try to soothe and make peace between them; she could not overcome their obstinacy or the hurts and resentment that had taken root in their hearts. Boryna's love had faded like last year's spring that no one remembers and there remained only the vivid memory of infidelity and smarting shame, and a cruel, relentless rancour. Jagna's soul was much changed too; words cannot express how bad it was for her, so hard and miserable: she did not yet feel herself to blame, but the punishment was all the more painful to her than for other women, as she had a more tender heart, had been more indulged, and was herself in any case more sensitive than others.

She suffered, Jesus, how she suffered!

Aye, she did everything possible to spite the old man, never backing down without compulsion, defending herself as best she could, but the yoke pressed down more heavily and painfully all the time, with no hope of rescue from any side. Many a time she'd wished to return to her mother – the old woman would not allow it, threatening to send her back to her husband by force on the end of a rope ... So what was she to do with herself? What? When she just couldn't live like other women, who denied themselves both pleasure and sweethearts, cheerfully put up with hell at home, fought with their men every day and every night went off to bed together reconciled. No, she couldn't do it. Life grew more loathsome to her all the time and some untold longing grew in her soul, did she even know for what?

She gave as good as she got, true, but inside she was in constant terror, greatly aggrieved and so embittered that sometimes she'd cry the whole night long, until her pillow was wet. Sometimes those days of quarrels and strife so wearied her that she was ready to run away anywhere in the great wide world!

But where could she go, where?

The world stood open on every side, but so terrifying, so unfathomable, so strange and hazy, that she almost died of fright at the thought, like a little bird that lads snatch and stick under a pot.

It was no wonder, then, that despite everything she clung to Antek, though she seemed to love him out of fear and grief alone, for something inside her had snapped and dimmed after that terrible night when she'd fled to her mother's, so that she didn't yearn for him with her whole soul as she had before, did not come running at every summons, heart thumping with joy, but went out of compulsion, because it was dull and tedious back at the house, because she wanted to spite the old man, because she imagined that their former great love would return. Deep in her heart, resentment burgeoned, virulent as poison. Everything happening to her, these woes and chagrin, this whole hard life, it was all because of him; and then there was a still more painful, quiet resentment, never to be spoken, that he was not the man she'd fallen in love with – there was the savage, tearing resentment of dismay and disillusion. Before, he'd seemed to her someone different, someone whose love had lifted her to heaven, disarmed her with affection, was dearer than anything on earth, and so unlike the others, unlike anyone else in all things – and now he seemed to her just like other men, worse even, for she feared him more than Boryna. He terrified her with his gloom and suffering and his ferocity horrified her. She feared him; he seemed to her terrible and savage as a bandit from the forest. Why, the priest himself had singled him out at church, the whole village shunned him, people pointed him out as the very worst kind. The threat of mortal sin seemed to pulse from him, so that sometimes she'd almost faint with terror at the sound of his voice, for it seemed to her he had the devil inside and hell all about him. Her soul was filled with terror then, as when the priest admonished the people and threatened them with eternal agonies!

It never crossed her mind that she too was guilty of those sins of his, not at all. If she ever reflected, it was only on how he had changed, and though she did not comprehend it clearly, she felt it strongly all the same, so that she instinctively felt less and less towards him and often stiffened in his arms, as though suddenly struck by lightning. She let herself be taken, for how could you resist such a dragon of a man? ... Besides, she was young, strong and hot-blooded, and he all but smothered her in his embraces, so despite all that was in her mind, she gave herself with equal passion, with the impulse of parched earth eternally craving warm rain and sunshine, except that not once did her soul now fall to his feet in unchecked pleasure, not once did she feel besotted with that happiness that leads to the very threshold of death in its delight, not once did she completely lose herself. She'd think about the house then, her chores and of what else she could do deliberately to provoke the old man, and sometimes wish he'd let her go more quickly and be off.

It was all going through her head now, as she drained the water from the potato pit in the yard. She worked reluctantly, out of obedience only, glancing intently in the direction of the old man's voice, to see where he was. Pietrek worked zealously so that clods and mud swished through the air, while she did just enough to appear as though she were working. As soon as the old man went into the house, she pulled her apron over her head and carefully climbed over the stile by the Płoszka's barn.

Antek was already there.

'I've been waiting a whole hour for you,' he whispered accusingly.

'You didn't have to wait if you're needed elsewhere,' she muttered grudgingly, looking about. It was a clear night, the rain had stopped and a cold dry wind was blowing from the forest and buffeting the gardens noisily.

He pulled her close forcibly and began to kiss her face.

'You reek of vodka like a barrel!' she whispered, leaning away in disgust.

'I had a drink, that's why. And now you think my face stinks.'

'Ha, I only meant the vodka!' she said more gently and quietly.

'I were here last night – how come you weren't out?'

'It were that cold, and I've plenty of work besides.'

'True, and you've got the old man to cuddle and tuck up under the quilt too!' he hissed.

'He's my husband after all!' she retorted, hard and impatient.

'Don't provoke me, Jagna!'

'If you don't like it, don't come. I won't be crying for you.'

'You're tired of coming out to meet me, tired of it ...'

'Why wouldn't I be, when you're forever at me, like I'm your dog ...'

'You're picking on that, are you, Jaguś, when I've that many troubles of my own it's no wonder sometimes a hard word slips out. It's not that I'm angry, no,' he whispered abjectly. Embracing her, he pressed her close affectionately, but she was stiff and sulky and if she replied at all it was only for the sake of it, and always looking about her, wanting to go back already.

He felt it keenly, without a doubt. It stung as though he'd had nettles pushed down his shirt, until he whispered with diffident reproach:

'You never used to be in such a hurry ...'

'I'm scared. Anyone in the house could be looking for me ...'

'Oh aye, you weren't afraid before to come out for the whole night. You've completely changed ...'

'Don't be daft, how am I changed?'

They fell silent, holding each other close. Sometimes they pressed against each other more passionately, united by a sudden craving, hungrily seeking each other's lips, caught up in a common wave of memories, a sense of guilt towards each other, self-pity, compassion, a deep desire to drown in one another – but they could not manage it, for their souls had moved far apart. They found no words to caress or soothe, for their hearts seethed with bitter grudges, so vivid that their arms unconsciously fell to their sides. They had cooled towards one another and become like frozen pillars, so that only their hearts beat hollowly, and on their lips floundered words of tenderness and consolation that they wished to say to one another but could not bring themselves to voice.

'D'you love me, Jaguś?' he whispered softly.

'I've said I do, haven't I? Just because I don't come out whenever you want ...' she retorted evasively, shifting her hip closer, for sorrow clutched at her soul and filled her eyes with tears. It made her want to cry in front of him and apologize that she couldn't love him any more, but he soon realized it, for that voice of hers froze his heart. He shook all over with the pain, and an anger full of recrimination and insuppressible resentment flooded his heart.

'You're lying like a dog; everyone's abandoned me, and you're keen to follow the rest. You love me like I'm a vicious mongrel that could bite you any minute and you can't get rid of, aye! I've seen right through you, I know you. If they wanted to hang me, you wouldn't begrudge the rope. If they wanted to stone me, you'd be the first to throw!' he rapped quickly.

'Jantos!' she exclaimed in alarm.

'Quiet, I'll say my piece!' he shouted threateningly, raising his fist. 'It's true, I'm telling you! And if it comes to it, it's all the same to me, all of it!'

'I've got to run, they're calling me!' she stammered, desperate to run away, greatly alarmed, but he seized her by the arm so that she couldn't move an inch, and in a hoarse, angry voice full of hatred, he went on:

'And I'll tell you this, cause your stupid head don't grasp that if I've gone to the dogs, it's because of you, through loving you – d'you understand? You! Why did the priest scold me and chase me out of church like a ruffian – because of you! Why has the whole village abandoned me like a leper – because of you! I suffered it all, bore it all, didn't even try to get revenge for the old man signing over so much of my birthright to you ... And now you're tired of me already, twisting about like an eel, lying. You run away, you're afraid of me and look at me like the rest of 'em, like I'm a murderer or worse! You need a new man now, a new one! You'd be glad to have the farmhands chase after you like dogs in springtime, you would!' he shouted, enraged. All the injuries and anger he'd fed on and lived on for so long came pouring out and he blamed her for all of it, cursed her for what he'd suffered, until finally his voice gave out. Such fury seized him that he fell upon her with his fists but remembered himself at the last moment; he just pushed her against the wall and hurriedly departed.

'My Jesus, Jantos!' she cried, suddenly understanding what had happened, but he did not come back. Racing after him in despair, she blocked his path and threw herself at his neck, but he tore her away like a leech, threw her to the ground and fled without a word. She collapsed in desperate weeping, as though the whole world were tumbling down around her.

It was only in the space of a good few prayers that she came round a little, still unable to grasp what had happened, but with the terrible sense that some hurt had been done her, some great injustice. Her heart was bursting with the pain, she was choking inside and wanted to shout with all her might at the whole world – that she was innocent, innocent! She called after him, though his steps had died away, she called into the night – but in vain. Deep, heavy contrition and true regret, the lurking, oppressive and awful fear that he wouldn't return and the old love, suddenly resurrected, fell upon her with the full harsh weight of her desolation, so that now, without a care for anything, she bawled openly as she went back to the cottage ...

On the porch she bumped into Kłab as he stuck his head around the door and shouted, 'They're felling the peasants' forest!' before rushing away.

The news spread round the village in a flash, exploding like a fire, engulfing every heart with distress and fierce anger, so that doors never stopped slamming as people ran from cottage to cottage with the news.

Indeed, it was a momentous matter for everyone and so grave that a sudden hush fell over the entire village as though lightning had struck it. Moving about fearfully, on tiptoe, they talked in whispers, weighing every word, looking about them nervously and listening out, ever watchful. No one shouted, no one wailed and no one agitated for vengeance, for everyone felt at that minute that this was no trifle, but a matter for which women's squeals would not suffice, but only clever thinking and common resolve.

It was late evening already, but all thought of sleep had flown. Many had abandoned their suppers, forgotten their evening chores, forgotten themselves, indeed, and just loitered about the lanes, standing in the yards or by the pond, while fearful, stifled whispers trembled in the darkness like the hum of bees.

The weather had quietened too. The rain had stopped. It had even brightened a little. Great clouds flew in herds across the sky and an icy wind blew low so that the ground began to freeze and the drenched black trees grew pale with hoar frost, yet voices, though muffled, carried more clearly.

All at once, word spread that some farmers had gathered and were marching to the Voyt's. Sure enough, Winciorek went by with limping Grzela; here came the Cabans' Michał with Franek Bylica, the cousin of Hanka's father. Socha went by, along with wry-mouthed Walek, Józek Wachnik, Kazimierz Sikora, even old Płoszka – only Boryna had not been spotted, but they said that he too had gone.

The Voyt was not at home, for right after noon he'd left for the chancellery, so the whole band descended on Kłab's cottage, a sizeable number of folk thronging behind them, including some women and children, but they shut the door, letting no one inside. Kłab's son Wojtek was ordered to watch the roads and inn in case a gendarme should appear.

In front of the house, meanwhile, more folk were gathering in the yard and even along the road, as everyone was curious as to what the elders would resolve. They debated long, but no one knew what was said, for all they could see was their bent grey heads through the window, in a semicircle around the hearth where a fire was burning, with Kłab standing to one side, holding forth and leaning over now and then to beat his fist on the table.

Impatience grew by the minute among those waiting, until finally Kobus, then Kozłowa and a few of the farmhands began to grumble and loudly rise against the counsellors, protesting they'd counsel up nothing good for folk since they only really cared about themselves and were ready even to make peace with the manor and cast the rest to their doom!

Kobus had grown so enraged by now, together with the hired hands and other poor wretches, that he openly began urging them to ignore the men conferring, to think of themselves, to come up with a plan of their own, and quickly, while there was time, while the others hadn't sold them down the river ...

At this, Mateusz appeared and began to exhort them to come to the inn, to talk things over freely, and not bark like dogs gathered under someone's fence ...

Folk were clearly swayed, since they moved as one towards the inn.

The Jew was already extinguishing the lamps, but he had to open up and looked with alarm at the crowd piling in. They entered in silence, calmly, taking up all the benches, tables and every corner, but no one drank and they just huddled together, talking quietly and waiting to see who would speak up first and what they would say ...

There was no lack of willing spokesmen, except that each still hesitated and looked to the others, until finally Antek leapt up, sprang to the middle and straight away began fulminating against the manor ...

Though he spoke straight to all their hearts, hardly anyone concurred. They balked at him, looking askance, unwillingly, even turning their backs, for they recalled the priest's rebukes all too well, and those sinful doings of his. He took no notice, and since he was carried away with passion and caught up in a kind of savage frenzy, he finished by shouting at the top of his voice:

'Don't give in, lads, do not! Don't ignore the injustice! Today they took your forest, and if you don't defend yourselves, tomorrow they'll be stretching out their hands for your land, your cottages, your property! Who'll forbid 'em, who'll oppose 'em?'

Folk suddenly surged forward. A dull murmur rippled around the room. The crowd swayed violently, eyes glistening wildly, a hundred fists pounded the air and a hundred voices roared as one, like thunder.

'Hands off! Hands off!' they roared, until the inn shook with the force of it. This was what the ringleaders had been waiting for. At once, Mateusz, Kobus, Kozłowa and others too leapt to the middle and began to shout, to rage, to incite ... Soon the inn was ringing with threats, swearing, stamping, the pounding of fists on tables and the loud, grim clamour of enraged folk.

Everyone was shouting their opinion, everyone was angry, everyone had a different plan. They thrashed about violently like dogs shut in a hallway with no one to let them out and set them on their enemies ... So a fierce tumult grew, cries and protests, for folk were maddened and venting injuries that had long rankled, and could not decide on a single course of action, for no one there had the power to take command of the rest and avenge them ...

They huddled in groups, each with its own blowhard who yelled and raged the loudest. Meanwhile the leaders wound their way through the crowd, butting in with a pointed word where needed, so that finally no one could hear anyone else, as all were shouting at once.

'They've brought half the forest down, and such oaks that five men couldn't span 'em!'

'Young Kłab saw 'em, Kłab!'

'They'll cut the rest down too, they will. They won't ask your permission!' screeched Kozłowa, squeezing through to the bar.

'They've always wronged the people, any way they could.'

'Because you're stupid as sheep, you let 'em drive you wherever they like ...'

'Don't give in, no! We must go together, chase 'em off, take back the forest!'

'Kill the wrongdoers!'

'Kill 'em!' they all yelled at once and up went the threatening fists again with a deafening roar. The whole crowd seethed with hatred and vengeance, and when it had subsided, Mateusz shouted to his lot from the bar:

'We're all tight as fish in a net here, with manors everywhere, on every side, squeezing the village and suffocating it. You want to graze your cow beyond the village – you're stepping on manor land; you let your horse out – it's manor land beyond the baulk; you cannot toss a stone without it landing in a manor field! ... And they'll soon have you – then it's the law courts, then the fines!'

'True, true! A good meadow gives two crops. The best fields are the manor's, the woods are the manor's, the forest – the manor's again. The manor has everything,' they concurred.

'While you, villagers, you can farm on sand, throw dung on the fire and wait on God's mercy!'

'Take back the forest, take back the land! Hands off what's ours!'

They went on shouting for a long time, flinging themselves about in all directions, swearing and hurling fierce threats. And since they were debating loudly and with some passion, more than one needed a drink to fortify him, a second had a beer to cool down and a third remembered his half-eaten supper and called to the Jew for bread and herring.

But when they'd eaten a little and drunk a little, their determination cooled markedly and they began slowly to disperse without resolving anything. Mateusz, meanwhile, with Kobus and Antek, who had kept to one side the whole time, deliberating to himself, went to Kłab's, and finding the farmers still there, arranged something together for the next day and quietly returned to their homes.

It was late. The lights had gone out in the cottages and silence had fallen over the village. Only a dog barked occasionally or the wind murmured and set the frozen trees knocking against each other in the murk like combatants, murmuring restlessly a long time after. There was a grand frost, whitewashing the fences, but from midnight the stars hid, it grew darker and the world became gloomy and somehow eerie ...

All the folk lay slumbering, but their sleep was heavy and feverish; now and again the quiet crying of a child would start, or someone woke up in a sweat and filled with such strange terrors that he had to fortify his soul with a prayer. Elsewhere, noises kept someone from sleeping so they'd jump up to check for burglars. Several shouted in their sleep, saying afterwards that a bogeyman was choking them, or the dogs howled so pitifully that your heart froze with alarm, terrifying foreboding and fear.

The night dragged long and heavy, ensnaring the soul in trepidation, unease and terrible dreams, full of spectres and feverish visions.

As soon as dawn came, and the day was barely up and folk still prising their eyes open and lifting heads heavy with sleep, Antek ran to the bell tower and began ringing the bell as though for a fire ...

In vain did Ambrozy and the organist try to forbid him. He swore at them, was even ready to fight, and carried on with all his might.

The bell pealed slowly, ceaselessly and so bleakly that it chilled the heart. Startled and alarmed, people ran out to ask what had happened and then remained in front of their cottages as though turned to stone, listening, for the bell kept tolling and sounding its great sombre voice in the dawn light, until the ground shuddered and the birds fled in panic to the forest. The frightened people crossed themselves, and Mateusz, Kobus and others were already running about the village, hammering sticks along the fences and shouting:

'To the forest! To the forest! Come out, everyone! Meet by the inn! To the forest!'

They dressed hell for leather, some still fastening clothes and finishing their prayers along the way, running at a gallop to the inn, where Kłab and some other farmers were already waiting.

The roads and homesteads began to swarm. The farmyards and all the cottages came to the boil at once. The children raised a fine hue and cry, the women yelled across the gardens. Such a hubbub arose, such commotion, as though fire had broken out in the village.

'To the forest! Bring what you've got – a scythe, a flail, a rod, an axe. Bring it!'

'To the forest!' The air shook with the cry and the whole village roared.

It was close on broad daylight now, quiet and clear, a little misty still and icy. The trees stood in cobwebs of hoar frost. The roads crunched underfoot, water had frozen and the puddles everywhere splintered like glass. Shouts and cries carried afar upon the sharp, bracing air that prickled the nostrils.

But the noise slowly faded as their hearts filled with determination, and a grim, relentless assurance seemed to harden their souls and clothe them in such stern gravity that they were unknowingly silent, sunk in themselves.

The crowd kept growing. They took up the entire square in front of the inn, right to the road, packed tightly, shoulder to shoulder – and still more latecomers arrived.

They greeted each other in silence, standing wherever there was space, gazing about and waiting patiently for the elders, who had gone to fetch Boryna.

He was first in the village, so it was his place to lead the people. No farmer would take a step without him. So they stood patiently, like trees in a forest crammed densely together, engrossed in the voices that emerged from it, the babbling streams that flowed here and there among the roots ... Sometimes a word would fly, a fist shoot into the air, or a pair of eyes would flash more keenly, a sheepskin swing more vigorously, or a face would flush, then they'd fall silent again, like sheaves of hay propped side by side.

The blacksmith rushed up, pushed through the crowd and began trying to deter the people, threatening that the whole village would end up in chains and languish in jail for what they had in mind, and the miller echoed him, but no one heeded them or listened. It was well known that both were in the manor's pocket and had their own interests at heart.

Rochy came, and with tears argued the same – it did not help.

Finally the priest rushed up and began to admonish them. They did not listen, but stood unmoved; no one even took off their cap, no one kissed his hand, and someone even shouted:

'They pay him so he preaches!'

'A sermon won't right no wrongs,' someone threw in mockingly.

So dour did they look and fierce that the priest burst into tears. He did not cease to swear by everything holy that they should come to their senses and go home, but he did not finish, for Boryna arrived and all the folk turned to him.

Maciej was white as a wall and so dour that a frost seemed to rise from him, but his eyes gleamed like a wolf's. Sullen and sure of himself, he walked erect, greeting his mates with a nod and casting his eyes over the people. They parted in front of him, making a clear path, and he climbed on to the logs lying by the inn, but before he could speak, the crowd began to shout:

'Lead us, Maciej! Lead us!'

'To the forest! To the forest!' others yelled.

Only when they were quiet did he lean forward, stretch out his arms and call out in a mighty voice:

'Christian folk, honest Poles, farmers and hired hands! We have all of us suffered an injustice! An injustice we cannot tolerate and cannot ignore! The manor is felling our forest, the manor

refused all of us employment, the manor is forever harrying and driving us to ruin! ... I can scarce remember all the injuries, the confiscations,³ the wrongs and vexations that people have borne! We've taken 'em to court – but who can touch 'em! We've voiced our complaints – for nothing! But now the last straw, they fell our wood! Will we settle for this, eh?'

'Nay, never! Chase 'em off, kill 'em, stop 'em!' they cried and their faces – ashen, clouded, morose – flared as though lit up by lightning. A hundred fists flashed in the air, and a hundred throats roared, and anger shook their hearts.

'It's our right, and no one recognizes it. Our forest, and they chop it down! So what are we wretches to do, when no one in the world stands up for us, and everyone does us harm, what?'

'Dear people, Christian folk, Poles, I say to you that there is no other way. We ourselves must defend what's ours, go all together to the forest and stop this felling! All of us, whoever has breath in their body, whoever can move their limbs, the whole village, as one! Do not be afraid, people, no, this is our right, our will and our justice, and they cannot punish the whole village. Follow me, people, gird yourselves, follow me! To the forest!' he bellowed.

'To the forest!' they roared in reply. There was pandemonium. The crowd swayed, broke apart and with a shout everyone raced home to get ready, so that a feverish flurry ensued of changing, harnessing, dragging out sleighs, horses neighing, children shouting, curses, lamenting women – the whole village was abuzz with preparations. In maybe a couple of prayers, now armed and ready, they headed for the poplar road, where Boryna was waiting on his sleigh with Płoszka, Kłab and the other leaders.

They fell into line just as they arrived – peasants, farmhands, women, even some older children; some on sleighs, some on horses, some in carts, while the rest, almost the whole village, set off on foot, like a dense thicket, long as a field of murmuring wheat, streaked with the red of the women's clothing. Stout poles bristled above them, rusty pitchforks, flails, and here and there a scythe glittered like a flash of lightning, as though folk were heading for the fields, except there was no laughter, no jokes or merriment. They stood in silence, dour and grim, ready for anything, and when the time came, Boryna stood up on his sleigh, swept his eyes over the people and shouted, crossing himself:

'In the name of Father, Son and Holy Ghost! Amen. Let's go!'

'Amen! Amen!' they echoed and since the Angelus bell had just trilled and the priest happened to be coming out for Mass, they crossed themselves, some took off their caps and beat their breasts, and one or two sighed sorrowfully. Then they moved off – orderly, resolute and in silence, almost the whole village. All except the blacksmith, lurking somewhere behind a fence, who made for his cottage, jumped on to a horse and galloped off to the manor along the side roads. Antek, meanwhile, who had hidden in the tavern when his father had appeared, took a shotgun from the Jew as soon as they moved off, hiding it under his sheepskin, and rushed to the forest across the fields ... not turning even to look at the crowd.

The people followed briskly after Boryna, who rode ahead. Right behind him came the Płoszkas, from as many as three cottages, with Stach leading. They were a plain tribe, but strident, loud and full of self-importance.

And after them came the Socha family, led by the Soltys.

Third came the Wachniks, slight and scrawny peasants, but vicious as hornets.

And fourth came the Gołąb family led by Mateusz. They were but few, but good as half a village as they were headstrong ruffians and sturdy as oaks.

And fifth the Sikoras, stocky as tree trunks, gruff and churlish.

And then came the Kłabs and other youths, full grown, lively, quarrelsome and eager for a fight, led by Grzela, the Voyt's brother.

And at the rear came the Bylicas, Kobuses, Pryczeks, Gulbases, Pacześes, Balcereks and too many to name besides!

They marched with a heavy tread until the ground shook, sombre, grim and menacing as a hail cloud that glistens as it grows, bloated with thunder, and falls silent, ready to burst with a crash at any moment and devastate the whole world.

And in their wake, the weeping, wailing and lamenting of those left behind.

The world was still inert after the chill of night, full of sleepy numbness and shrouded in translucent icy mists.

Silence hung over the forest, a piercing cold carried on the breeze. The tips of trees were black in the feeble light of dawn that slipped here and there on to the pale snows.

Only Wolf's Hollow thundered again and again with the sound of trees crashing down, the striking of axes and the shrill rasping of saws.

They were felling the forest!

More than forty peasants had been working since dawn. They'd dropped upon the forest like a flock of woodpeckers pinning themselves to the trunks, knocking so doggedly and ferociously that the trees were coming down one after another. The clearing grew, a trampled field of felled giants lay in a row, leaving only slender striplings jutting here and there like sharp thistles or stooping heavily like mothers weeping piteously over the fallen. In places, an untouched bush rustled sadly, or some stunted tree – a runt the axe had not snatched – trembled fearfully, and everywhere, on the sheets of trampled snows, as though upon their final shrouds, lay smitten trees, heaps of branches, lifeless crowns and mighty logs, like stripped and quartered corpses, while streams of golden sawdust, the piteous blood of the forest, spilled about the snows.

Encircling the clearing, as though around an open grave, stood the forest, in a dense, proud and impenetrable throng, like friends and kin and neighbours, leaning huddled in fearful silence and listening with a stifled cry of grief to those falling to their deaths as they numbly watched the inexorable mowing.

For the loggers were pressing forward relentlessly. They spread out and slowly, in silence, advanced in a long row into the seemingly endless forest, which barred their way with a sombre lofty wall of close-set trunks, so immense that folk disappeared completely in the shadow of the boughs and just their axes flashed in the gloom, hacking tirelessly. Only the whistle of the saws never paused for a moment, and every so often a tree would sway and suddenly, like a bird treacherously caught in a snare, was torn from its fellows, thrashing its branches, and with a deathly moan fell to the ground – and after it a second, a third ... a tenth ...

Huge pines fell, already green with age; firs fell, clothed in their coarse capotes; spreading spruces and grizzled oaks fell, their grey beards grown with moss like ancients – trees that thunderbolts had not overcome and hundreds of years had not crumbled, but the axes dealt them death, and so many others more commonplace; who could list them all, their number, or their kind!

The forest was groaning as it died. The trees fell heavily like peasants jammed together in battle, propping each other up, stubborn, sturdy, but battered by an indefatigable force, barely having time to cry 'Jesus!' before whole ranks bowed and bent together, tumbling to their cruel deaths.

Moans rippled through the forest. The earth trembled continually from the falling trees. Axes never ceased to fall, the rasping of the saws was never-ending and the whistle of branches rent the air like a final sigh.

So hour followed upon hour, fresh swathes of trees filled the clearing and the work never paused.

The magpies screamed as they hung from the striplings, or a flock of crows would glide, croaking, over that field of death, or some creature would slide out of the thickets, stand at the edge and cast its bright eyes a long time over the smoky plumes of fires, the falling trees, and, spying people, run away with a cry.

The peasants hacked away doggedly, eating into the wood like wolves when they hunt down a flock as it retreats, bunched together, petrified, bleating, and wait until the last sheep falls into their jaws.

It wasn't until after breakfast, when the sun had risen far enough for the hoar frost to begin dripping and golden shafts of light were creeping across the forest, that someone caught the sound of a distant commotion.

'Some people coming – a crowd of 'em,' someone said, putting his ear to a tree.

The hum was getting closer and clearer. Soon individual shouts could be heard and the dull thud of many feet. Quick as a Hail Mary, a sleigh loomed along the path that led from the village and soon it arrived in the clearing. Boryna stood up, and behind him, on horses, carts and on foot, spilled a dense crowd of women, men and youths, all of them clamouring fiercely, and swooping down on the woodcutters.

Leaping down from his sleigh, Boryna rushed forward at their head. Behind him, meanwhile, others followed just as they came, some threatening with sticks, some brandishing pitchforks, some gripping flails in their fists. Here someone flashed a scythe, another wielded only a branch, while the women fell upon them with fingernails and cries alone, and all of them hurled themselves at the terrified woodcutters.

'Stop! Get out of the forest! It's ours!' they were yelling all together, so that no one could understand what they wanted, until Boryna paused by the petrified woodcutters and bellowed so loud it boomed throughout the forest:

'People from Modlica! People of Rzepki and wherever else you're from, listen to me!'

The noise subsided a little and again he called out:

'Take what's yours and go with God. We forbid this felling, and any that don't listen will have these folk to answer to ...'

They did not resist, for the stern faces, sticks, pitchforks, flails and so many angry people, ready for battle, filled them with fear. They began to confer, rally, tucking their axes into their belts, gathering their saws and huddling together, scowling and grumbling – particularly the Rzepki lot, since they were gentry and had for centuries skirmished with their Lipce neighbours. Cursing out loud, they shook their axes and muttered threats but, like it or not, they conceded to force. The Lipce folk, meanwhile, yelled menacingly and, advancing, drove them into the forest.

Others dashed about the clearing in the meantime, putting out the fires and dismantling the fathoms of wood.⁴ On spying the huts knocked together from planks at the edges of the clearing, the women, Kozłowa at their head, rushed to tear them down and scatter the pieces so that not a trace would be left.

Boryna, meanwhile, since the woodcutters had withdrawn so easily, rallied the farmers and urged them all to go as a band to the manor now and warn the squire not to dare touch the wood until the law had returned to the peasants what was theirs. But before they'd conferred and settled on what best to do, the women raised a cry and began to run away from the huts in all directions, for a few dozen horses had burst out of the forest and were bearing down upon them ...

The manor, alerted, had arrived to help the woodcutters.

The steward came riding at the head of the farmhands. They burst into the clearing and immediately set upon the women with whips. First to start lashing was the steward, hefty as a bison, who shouted:

'Lice-ridden thieves! Whip 'em good! Tie 'em up and throw 'em in the slammer!'

'Stick together, together, to me – don't give in!' yelled Boryna, for folk were flying, terrified, in all directions now, but at the sound of that voice they stopped in their tracks. Ignoring the whips raining down on their heads and shielding themselves with their arms, they ran swiftly to the old man.

'Cudgel those sons-of-bitches! Flail the horses!' shouted the angered old man and, grabbing a wooden stake, he was the first to hurl himself at the manor men. He thrashed in all directions, while behind him, like a forest in the grip of anger, the peasants knit themselves shoulder to shoulder, flail by flail, pitchfork by pitchfork, and with an enormous roar threw themselves at the manor's men, flogging whoever they reached first, until thudding resounded everywhere, as though someone were hulling peas on the ground with a stick.

An inhuman clamour arose: swearing, the squeals of set-upon horses, the moans of the wounded, the dull blows of stakes raining down, rasping scuffles and the savage cries of the battlefield.

The manor's men defended themselves stoutly, matching the peasants in their swearing and blows, until they finally began to retreat in confusion, for the horses, lashed by the flails, stood stock still and reared back, squealing, until the steward, seeing what was happening, girded his bay⁵ and leapt straight into the crowd towards Boryna. But that was the last they saw of him, for flails whistled immediately, a dozen blows hailed down upon him and a dozen pairs of hands grabbed at him from every side and dragged him from his horse. Sailing through the air like an uprooted bush, he landed in the snow at their feet. Boryna was barely able to shield him and drag the unconscious man to a safer spot.

Then suddenly everything swirled and snarled together, like a whirlwind unexpectedly crashing into haystacks and creating confusion, sending one great tangle of straw tumbling about the fields and toppling on to the strips. A terrible cry arose and such mayhem, such a maelstrom, that nothing could now be seen beyond a single entwined mass of bodies, rolling about the snows, fists pounding in fury. Sometimes someone would break free of the scrimmage and run like mad, then suddenly turn and, with a shout of renewed rage, throw themselves back into the fight.

They grappled hand to hand or they banded together; they seized each other by the hair or collar, crushing opponents with their knees, clawing to the flesh, and still could not get the upper hand, because the manor lot had jumped down from their horses and would not give an inch. What's more, help kept arriving, for the woodcutters had joined them, assisting them stoutly. First the men of Rzepki rushed as one to the rescue, in silence like savage dogs. All of them were led by the woodsman, who'd appeared at the last moment, and since he was built like a bull, a well-known giant of a man in all the neighbouring villages, and truculent with it, harbouring his own grudges towards the Lipce villagers, he threw himself into the fray, fighting single-handed against whole bands, knocking heads with the butt of his shotgun, scattering them and giving them such a hiding that God help them!

Stacho Płoszka made to restrain him, for folk had begun to run away at the sight of him, but he was caught by the collar, swung through the air and thrown to the ground like a sheaf of threshed wheat, and Stacho fell unconscious. Then one of the Wachniks leapt at the woodsman, smashing down on his shoulder with a flail, but in return got a fist between the eyes, so that he just spread his arms and uttered the word 'Jesus!' before crashing to the ground.

Unable to stand it any longer, Mateusz finally threw himself at the woodsman, but though he was a burly peasant, and the only one to equal Antek, he didn't last even the length of a prayer; the woodsman knocked him down and thrashed him, rolling him in the snow and forcing him to flee. He made for Boryna, who was cracking Rzepki heads together in the middle of the fray, but before he could get his hands on him, the women fell upon him with shrieks, grabbed hold of him, clawing his face, dug their talons into his tangled hair, piled upon him and pinned him to the ground. They tussled with him like mongrels when they fall upon a sheepdog and plunge in their fangs, dragging him this way and that.

It was then that the Lipce folk began to get the upper hand. They clustered together and mingled like leaves. Each man set upon another, choking and wrestling with him in the snow, while the women attacked from the sides, tearing at their opponents' hair.

The uproar, the confusion, the turmoil now were such you could barely make out friend from foe, but at last they overcame the manor's men, a few of whom lay bloodied, while others, exhausted and weakened, fled stealthily into the forest. Only the woodcutters carried on defending themselves to the end of their strength, some even begging for mercy, but as the Lipce folk were even more enraged at them than at the manor's men, and had flared like firebrands in the wind, they heeded no pleas and, oblivious of everything, pounded them with unbridled fury.

Flinging their cudgels, flails and pitchforks aside, they set upon each other bare-handed, man to man, fist to fist, brawn to brawn, and wrestled, choking, tearing, rolling about the ground, so that shouts subsided now and only heavy wheezing, swearing and scuffling could be heard.

An unutterable day of reckoning indeed!

People had almost lost their minds, so carried away were they in their ferocity and anger. Kobus and Kozłowa in particular looked completely crazed – they were a terror to see, so bloody and beaten, yet still hurling themselves into the fray despite it.

So they continued to grapple, to ever greater shouts from the Lipce folk. Now began the pursuit of those fleeing, with ten setting upon one. Having finally shaken off the women, though very much the worse for wear and all the more enraged as a result, the woodsman began to call and rally his men together. Spotting Boryna, he leapt at him. They seized each other round the middle, shoulders locked like bears, and began to push and stagger, pitching against trees, as they'd stumbled into the forest now.

It was then that Antek arrived, greatly delayed; he stood at the edge of the wood to catch his breath and immediately saw what was happening to his father.

He cast his hawk eyes about. No one was watching – they were all so deep in combat or in such confusion that he could not recognize a single face – so he drew back, made his way stealthily towards Boryna and stopped a few paces behind a tree.

The woodsman had the advantage, but it was hard going, for he was worn out and the old man was holding up vigorously. They fell down, rolling like two dogs, battering against the ground, but the old man was more often beneath. His hat had fallen off and his grey head bumped among the roots.

Looking about again, Antek pulled out the shotgun from under his sheepskin, crouched down and, crossing himself unconsciously, aimed at his father's head ... but before he could pull the trigger, Boryna and the woodsman both staggered to their feet. Antek rose too and put the gun to his eye – he did not shoot, however. A sudden terrible fear gripped his heart so hard so that he could barely breathe; his hands shaking as if in a fever, he was trembling all over. His vision darkened and his head was spinning, so that he stood a long moment not knowing what was happening to him, then suddenly a short, dreadful cry rang out:

'Help, people! Help!'

At that moment the woodsman had smashed Boryna's head with the butt of his gun until the blood gushed. The old man cried out, raised up his hands and fell like a log to the ground ...

Coming to his senses, Antek threw aside the shotgun and leapt to his father. The old man was wheezing, blood was pouring down his face, his head almost split in two; he was still alive, but his eyes were misted and his legs were jerking.

'Father! Jesus! Father!' he cried in a terrible voice. Snatching him up in his arms, pressing him to his breast, he shouted at the top of his voice:

'Father! They've killed him! Killed him!' He howled like a bitch whose pups are being drowned.

A few folk nearest to hand heard and ran to help. They laid the injured man on branches and began to heap his head with snow and try to save him as best they could. Antek, meanwhile, sat on the ground, tearing at his hair, and shouted frantically:

'They've killed him! They've killed him!'

They thought he was losing his mind.

All at once he quietened, then everything rushed back suddenly and he threw himself at the woodsman with a terrible cry and such madness in his eyes that the latter took fright and began to run. Sensing that the other was catching up, the woodsman turned abruptly and shot him almost straight in the chest. He missed by some miracle, however, and only tarred his face. Antek fell upon him like a thunderbolt.

In vain did the woodsman defend himself, in vain did he dodge, in vain was he brought by grief and mortal fear to beg for mercy – Antek tore him apart like a frenzied wolf, choking his throat till his Adam's apple crunched, lifting him up and beating him against a tree until he released his final breath.

Then Antek seemed to come to and, beside himself, plunged into the fight. Wherever he appeared hearts cowered, people ran in fear, for he was terrible to behold, smeared in his father's blood and his own, without a hat, hair matted, livid as a corpse – a horrible sight and so supernaturally powerful that, almost single-handed, he beat and trounced the rest of those still resisting. Finally they had to calm and drag him away or he would have beaten the others to death ...

The fighting ended and the Lipce villagers, though exhausted, wounded and bloody, filled the woods with joyful clamour.

The women saw to those most badly wounded and carried them to the sleigh, and they were not a few. One young Kłab had a broken arm, Jędrzych Pacześ a twisted leg, so that he could not take a step and yelled to high heaven when they were carrying him. Kobus, meanwhile, was so beaten up that he couldn't move, Mateusz was bleeding freely and complained of his back, and others too had not half suffered, so there was barely anyone who'd escaped unhurt, but because they'd come out on top, they shouted loud and joyfully, ignoring their injuries – and prepared to return to the village.

They laid Boryna in the sleigh and moved forward slowly, fearing that he might die along the way. He was unconscious, and from under his bandages the blood kept flowing, pouring over his eyes and entire face. He was white as a linen sheet and utterly like a corpse.

Antek walked by the sleigh, staring at his father, terrified, holding his head steady along the ruts and quietly stammering over and over, pleadingly, pitifully:

'Father! Oh God, Father!'

The people trudged pell-mell, in groups, as best they could, along the edge of the forest, for the middle of the road was taken up by sleighs carrying the wounded. Here and there someone groaned. The rest laughed loudly, shouting merrily and noisily. They began to talk and talk, boasting of their pre-eminence and mocking the beaten. Songs had begun to resound, or a whoop would echo round the forest, and all were drunk on triumph, so that they kept bumping into trees or tripping over roots ...

Hardly anyone felt their bruises or tiredness, for all hearts were bursting with the elation of victory, full of rejoicing and such might that, had anyone opposed them then, they'd have ground him to dust and taken on the whole world.

They marched briskly, loudly, noisily, casting bright eyes over the forest they'd won, which swayed about their heads, murmuring sleepily and dripping the dew of melted snow upon them, as though sprinkling them with tears.

Suddenly Boryna opened his eyes and stared a long time at Antek, as though not believing his own eyes, until a deep, quiet joy lit up his face, he moved his lips a couple of times and with the greatest of efforts he whispered:

'Is it you, Son? ... Is it you?'

And then he fainted again.

PART III

SPRING

CHAPTER I

It was first light and spring was in the air.

The April day heaved itself lazily from a bed of mists and murk like a sprawling exhausted farmhand who hadn't rested his fill, but must rouse himself at sunrise to take hold promptly of the plough and press on with the tilling.

Dawn was breaking.

The silence was quite lifeless still, but for the dew dripping copiously from the trees as they slumbered in the dense mist.

The sky, like a blue-tinged dew-damp sheet, was slowly unfurling against the silent black earth, still plunged in darkness.

Mists spilled like frothing milk over the flood-meadows and lowland fields. The first cockerels began to crow in the still-invisible villages.

The last stars were going out like eyes closing, heavy with drowsiness.

To the west, meanwhile, like embers glowing under cooling ashes, the red dawn began to glow.

The mists reeled and swelled abruptly. Shifting heavily like the waters of a spring thaw, they tumbled on to the black fields or spiralled towards the sky in blue threads like burning incense.

Day was rising, tussling with fading night, which clung to the earth like a thick, sodden fleece.

Brightness slowly suffused the sky, which descended ever lower over the world. Here and there the tips of trees wrestled free of the mists, while, elsewhere on the uplands, grey fields, drenched in dew, shook off the night. Ponds glittered like blinded mirrors and streams wound in long bedewed twists of yarn through the thinning haze of daybreak.

The day was filling out. Early-morning light filtered into the dull grey and the sky began to glow like the blood-red reflection of some distant conflagration. It grew so grand and bright that the dark rim of forest sprang into view along the horizon, and the great road, lined with rows of poplars, stooping as though marching wearily uphill, heaved slowly into view in the growing light, while the villages, sunk in earthbound shadows, peeked out into the daybreak here and there, like black stones from under foaming water, and some nearer trees were already silvered in the morning dew.

The sun had not yet risen, but it seemed that in barely a prayer it would break through dawn's burning brilliance and fall upon a still-drowsing world that was only just opening its bleary, clouded eyes, shifting slightly, wakening slowly, but still lazing in sweet and restful slumber. The silence rang louder in the ears, as though the ground were holding its breath. All except for the wind, hushed as a child's sigh that wafted from the woods, shaking the dew from the trees.

Suddenly, from out of the faint grey shadows of daybreak, from those dim and sleepy fields – hushed and prayerful as a church when the priest is about to lift the sacred Host at the Elevation – rose the song of a lark ...

Soaring free of the fields, it flapped its wings and began to trill in a voice like a little bell of pure silver, like a fragrant rush of spring. It glowed in the pale sky, winging upwards, growing louder, so that in that holy silence of the eastern sky, its song rang out over the whole world.

Then other birds began to take flight and beat their wings, straining for the sky and singing fervently, announcing morning to all living things.

Lapwings quickly followed, chirping plaintively on the marshes.

The storks' clatter too began to resonate around the villages, indiscernible as yet in the greyness.

The sun, meanwhile, had almost, almost come ...

And then from beyond the distant forest it rose from the abyss and – like a huge, golden fiery paten carried in invisible divine hands above the sleepy lands, blessing the world with light, the living and the dead, the budding and the decaying – it began the holy offering of the day, as though everything had suddenly crumbled to dust before its majesty and fallen silent, closing its unworthy eyes.

And here was day, spreading out in an immeasurable sea of festive light.

Mists like the fragrant smoke of censers drifted from the meadows towards the golden sky, and the birds and all living creatures raised a great clamouring song, a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving.

Meanwhile, the sun kept swelling, rising over the dark woods, over countless villages, ever higher, huge, burning, hot, like the holy eye of the Lord's mercy, resuming its reign of sovereign and sweet power over the world.

Just then, on a sandy hillside by the forest, where the manor's lupin ricks stood alongside the wide and bumpy road, appeared old Agata, the Kłąbs' kinswoman.

Returning from her beggary, upon which she'd embarked for Jesus' bread back at potato digging, she was wending her way to Lipce now, like those birds that always return to their nests in springtime.

An aged thing she was, gaunt and feeble and gasping for breath. She looked like a roadside willow, twisted and decaying, in which the sap is barely rising as the tree wilts in the sandy soil; she was in rags now, with her beggar's staff in her hand, her bundles on her back, rosary beads dangling.

Agata left the ricks behind and scurried along hurriedly, just as day was breaking. She lifted her face, dry and ashen as last year's barren fallow fields, to the sun; only her bloodshot grey eyes sparkled with joy.

She was returning to her native village, after all! And following a long and heavy winter at that, so she was all but trotting, her little bags bounced at her sides and her rosaries jingled, but as she panted and her chest ached with the effort, she had to keep stopping and slow down, toiling along laboriously. Only her hungry eyes darted about, and she smiled at those grey fields veiled in greenish mists, at the villages slowly emerging from the sunken haze, at the still-leafless trees guarding the roads or patrolling the fields like solitary watchmen, and at the whole world!

The sun was two men high by now and you could see the very furthest edges of the fields. Everything shone with rosy dew. The black fields glistened in the sunlight, water shimmered in the furrows, the voices of skylarks rang in the chilly air, while under the stone heaps the last patches of snow lingered. Yellow catkins trembled like amber prayer beads, and in hollows or under warmed puddles goldish blades of young grass pushed through last year's russet and the yellow eyes of marsh marigolds peered out. A faint breeze began to pick up and shake the damp, fresh scents over the fields as they basked lazily in the sun and everywhere felt so vast and bright and springlike, though still with a touch of grey, and breathed such delight, that Agata's soul leapt as if to fly, as a bird drunk with joy soars with a cry into the world.

'My Jesus! Dear Jesus mine!' she could hardly whimper, stooping a little, as though to scoop up the whole world into her tender heart bursting with joy.

Hej! For spring was coming along the endless plains. The song of skylarks announced it to the world. Here was the holy sun, and the caressing wind, sweet and warm as a mother's kisses, and that still-stifled breathing of the land as it waited longingly for the plough and the seed, and that festive ferment rising everywhere, and the warm bracing air that seemed swollen with the promise of greenness, blossom and full ears of grain.

Hej! For spring was coming, a fair lady arrayed in sunlight, with the fresh face of dawn and plaits of blue water. She streamed from the sun, drifted over the lands on those April mornings, releasing joyously proclaiming skylarks from her outstretched holy hands. Arrows of bugling cranes trailed in her wake, skeins of wild geese floated across the pale sky, storks sailed over the wetlands, swallows twittered beside the cottages – all the birds of the air arrived with their own song. Wherever her sunlit robe touched the earth, trembling grasses grew, sticky buds swelled, green shoots sprang up, shy leaves rustled and new, abundant, powerful life surged, for spring was coming the whole world over, from east to west, like God's illustrious messenger, bringing grace and favour ...

Hej! Springtime was embracing the crooked earthbound cottages, peering under the thatch with compassionate eyes, rousing the numb and darkened soil of human hearts, so that people lumbered forth from shadow and tribulation, their hopes raised for better fortune, more bountiful harvest and for that time of longed-for happiness ...

The earth rang out with life like a silent bell hung with a new heart, a clapper wrought of sunshine, so that it peals on high, rings, resounds joyfully, awakens the fearful and sings of such things and such matters, such wonders and powers, that hearts beat time and tears start from the eyes, and the immortal strength of the human spirit is resurrected and kneels with happiness to embrace this earth, this whole world, every bursting clod, every tree, every stone and every cloud, every single thing that sees and feels ...

All this Agata felt as she limped along slowly, devouring with eager eyes this beloved, holy land, so that she almost reeled as though drunk.

Until finally, when the Angelus bell warbled like a little bird from the Lipce church, summoning folk to prayer, the old woman came to and fell suddenly to her knees.

'... that by your holy will, I have come home ... that you, Lord, have shown mercy on a poor wretch ...'

Agata could hardly speak! Tears flooded her heart like abundant rain and streamed down her pinched face. She could but mutter a little and trembled so hard it was impossible to find either her rosary or words of prayer, scattered through her soul like burning drops of dew. She got up resolutely and went on, keenly observing the fields and murmuring aloud some suddenly remembered snatches of prayer ...

It was broad daylight now and the mists quite fallen away. Lipce appeared before her as though it might fit on the palm of her hand. It lay low around a huge pond, gleaming like a mirror veiled by a thin white haze. Ensnared, smug and self-satisfied, among the still-bare orchards, the squat, wide cottages clustered around the water like a group of housewives. Here and there, smoke rose

above the thatched roofs, windowpanes glittered in the sun and freshly whitewashed walls shone through the dusky orchards.

Agata could make out every individual cottage now. Meanwhile, the noisy clatter of the mill grew louder. It stood at the edge of the village by the road along which she passed, while almost opposite, at the other end, among huge trees, rose the church with its high white walls and shining windows and gold cross on the cupola. Beside it the red tiles of the presbytery roof were visible. All around, as far as the eye could see, stretched a blue wreath of woods and boundless fields. Villages lay in the distance, hidden among orchards and clinging to the ground like grey caterpillars, with winding roads, stone heaps, rows of leaning trees, sandy dunes sparsely scattered with juniper bushes, and the narrow thread of a little river, glistening as it flowed and emptied into the pond between the cottages.

Nearer still, around the village, lay the Lipce lands in a great belt, carved into strips, like warp threads of coarse linen unfurled along the hillsides and cut into sections. Field twisted and stretched beside field, divided by winding baulks on which spreading pear trees grew in dense clumps. Stone heaps were overgrown with briars, the dirt-grey rags of fallow land sharply hewn in the golden light; here were greenish sheets of winter wheat, last year's blackening potato fields or this year's new-ploughed earth, ashen water glinting in scattered hollows like molten glaze. Beyond the mill spread rust-coloured meadows where storks waded, clattering now and then, and cabbage fields still rested under water, so that only the peaks of their softened ridges could be seen, glistening like eels, and white-bellied lapwings circled above. Holy crucifixes and figures of saints watched over crossroads, while over this whole land, a little sunk in places where a village lay, hung the hot golden sun. The songs of larks echoed, sometimes the plaintive bellow of cattle could be heard, or the honking of geese, and human calls rang clearly upon a warm and pleasant breeze that gathered up all these voices, so that the earth seemed plunged in the quietness and pensive holy moment of births and beginnings.

But there was little sign of people working in the fields, other than a few women right by the village pottering about as they scattered manure, making Agata's nostrils twitch at the sharp pungent aroma.

'Have the layabouts overslept or what? The finest of days, and no one out in the fields ... The soil's fair begging for the plough!' she muttered in disgust.

To get closer still to the strips, she climbed down from the road on to a path winding behind the ditch where daisies were already opening their pink eyelashes in the sun and the grass grew more lushly green. Indeed, so empty were the fields it was a wonder! Agata minded well, after all, how in other years at this time the strips would be red with women's skirts already and the air trembling with their cries and singing. She knew too that in weather like this it was time to cart manure out from the yards, and to sow – but today? She'd spotted a single solitary peasant somewhere in the middle of the fields sowing something. He bent over as he walked and wheeled round, tossing seed in a semicircle.

'Must be sowing peas this early ... Dominikowa's lad, it looks like – that's where their fields lie ... May the merciful God bless and grant you a good crop, dear farmers!' Agata whispered from the bottom of her heart.

The path was rough and uneven, heaped in places with fresh molehills, stones and mud, but she paid no attention, looking about with delight and emotion at every strip, at each little patch of land.

'The priest's rye, lush it is, off to a good start! ... True, when I set off into the world, the lad were ploughing and the good father were sitting somewhere here, I well recall ...'

And she hobbled on, sighing heavily and tearfully casting her eyes about.

'Well, I never, the Ploszka's rye ... must be late, or it's rotted a bit.'

She bent down with difficulty to touch the damp stalks with her trembling old fingers and stroked them lovingly, like a child's hair.

'Boryna's wheat, a fine piece of ground! Aye! ... First farmer in Lipce, after all ... but it's yellowing a mite, must've been nipped by frost or something ... There's been a hard winter here ...' she pondered, noticing the traces of heavy snows and recent thawing along the flattened strips and among the dried stalks of winter wheat stuck in the ground, all heaped with sludge.

'Folk have surely suffered, poor things, known a bit o' hunger!' she said with a sigh, and shielded her eyes with her hand, for ahead some boys were approaching from the village.

'Why, it's the organist's Michał with some other lad o' theirs. With that many baskets they're likely off to Wola for the Easter census¹ ... Aye, must be them.'

She praised God in greeting when they approached, greatly eager to chat with them a little, but the boys just muttered back the greeting and passed by quickly, deep in conversation with each other.

'I've minded them since they were babes and they don't recognize me!' Her spirits were dampened. 'Well, why should they remember such an old beggar! But Michał has grown up grand, he's likely playing the organ for the priest already ...'

She mused, gazing at the road again, when a Jew appeared from the village, pushing a fair-sized calf ahead of him.

'Who'd you buy that from?' she accosted him.

'Mrs Kłab!' he answered, struggling with the white-and-red bullock, which resisted, turning about and bellowing mournfully.

'No doubt one of the skewbald's calves ... aye ... she would have birthed before the harvest ... or maybe one of the grey's ... A fine calf ...'

Agata watched him with a housewife's gratified eye, but they were off: the calf had broken free, jumping into the field, and, lifting his tail, he now tore cross-country towards the village with the Jew, gabardine flying, running in his wake.

'Kiss his tail and ask him nicely, and he'll come back,' she whispered, watching the chase with satisfaction.

'And not a living soul on the Kłabs' morgen!' she observed, but there was no time for deliberations now: the village was so near she could smell the smoke and see quilts airing in the gardens.

She drank in the whole place with her eyes, her heart brimming with joy and deepest gratitude that Jesus had spared her until this spring to return here, to her own, to her kin ...

For she could so easily have perished in the winter among strangers; she had been mightily ill, but Jesus had brought her home ...

This alone had fed her soul throughout that long winter, this alone had strengthened her at every hour, this had been her defence against the frosts, wretchedness and death ...

She sat down by the roadside bushes, to gather herself a little, before stepping among the cottages, but what strength had she, when joy disarmed her so that every last bone in her body was quaking and her heart was thumping painfully like a smothered bird?

'There are still good and kindly people, there are ...' she whispered, carefully arranging her little bags. She'd scraped enough together to do for her funeral.

She'd planned for many a year and put her whole soul into it that the Lord Jesus should ordain her time of death to befall in her own village, in a cottage, on a bed with a quilt, under a row of holy pictures, the way every housewife should die. All her life she'd saved for this final holy moment.

She had a chest all ready in the loft at the Kłabs', and in it a sizeable quilt, along with pillows, sheets and new pillowslips – everything clean, and never used, so as not to get grubby but to have it always ready, for indeed there was nowhere to put out this linen. Had she ever had a room of her own or even a bed? Always in some corner, on a pallet, or in a byre, as circumstances allowed and where good people let her rest her head. She'd never been one to push herself forward among the mighty and powerful. She did not complain of her fate, for she knew well that the world was ordered according to the will of God and it was not a sinner's place to change it.

So ever so secretly, ever so quietly, apologizing to God for presuming, she dreamed of this one thing, to be buried like a farmer's wife – she begged timidly for this one thing ...

It was no wonder, then, that having dragged herself to the village, at the end of her tether, feeling that her last days were almost upon her, she began to go over things in her mind, and see if she'd forgotten anything.

But no, she had all that was necessary: the funeral candle she'd brought with her – she'd begged it after watching over some departed soul² – and a little bottle of holy water she had. She'd bought a new aspergillum,³ and a holy picture of the Częstochowa Virgin, which she must have in her hand at the hour of dying, and a few dozen zlotys for the burial ... Perhaps there'd be enough for a holy Mass at the coffin, with candles and sprinkling of holy water – in the church porch at least! For indeed, she dare not dream of the priest accompanying her to the graveyard.⁴

As if that could ever be! ... Not even every farmer had the good fortune of such an honour, and besides all her money would not suffice for that one thing!

She sighed sorrowfully, rising to her feet.

She felt strangely weaker. There was a stabbing in her chest and she had to keep resting, for a racking cough meant she could barely drag her feet.

'If I could hold on to haymaking or the first harvest,' she dreamed, resting her eyes on the sweet sight of the nearest cottages. 'And then I'll lie down, and die for you, dearest Jesus, I'll die ...'

she continued, as though timidly excusing herself for these sinful hopes.

But straight away she was smitten with anxiety: who would take her in for this time of dying?

'I will find some good and kindly folk, and maybe I can promise them a little sum, so they'll agree more willingly ... Aye! Who wants the bother of a stranger in the house.'

She dared not even think of it happening at the cottage of her kin, the Kłabs.

'That many children, crowded in the house, and now the poultry's hatching and needing room, it wouldn't be honourable for such farmers to have beggarly kin dying under their roof ...'

So her thoughts ran without rancour as she took the road running along the slightly raised dyke that stopped the pond from flooding the low-lying meadows and the cabbage fields.

The mill stood to one side of the dyke, but so low that its wet roof overhung the road somewhat and it shook all over with a dull rumble as it worked.

To her left shone the pond, the sun trailing its golden hair along the quiet water reflecting the blue sky. Honking geese batted their wings on its banks, overgrown with leaning alders, while droves of children chased along the still-muddy roads, shouting with delight.

Set deep among its sprawling orchards and homesteads, Lipce occupied both sides of the pond, just as before and just as it had been, no doubt, since the world began.

Agata toiled along. Only her eyes darted quickly, taking in everything. At the miller's house, set back from the road, for all the world like some manor, white curtains fluttered at the wide-open windows. The miller's wife herself sat on the threshold, surrounded by a squealing gaggle of geese, yellow as candle wax, which she was gathering together.

The old woman greeted her and passed by quietly, pleased that the dogs, lazying by the walls, had not noticed her. She crossed the bridge under which the water poured with a rumble from beneath the mill-wheels. Here the roads branched out like two arms clasping the whole pond in their embrace. She wavered for a moment, but the desire to look at everything prevailed and she took the somewhat longer road to the left.

The smithy, first on her way, was silent and shut. The front of a cart and a somewhat rusty plough lay at the foot of the soot-caked walls, but there was no sign of the blacksmith, only his wife in her chemise, digging seedbeds in the garden alongside the road.

Agata paused by every cottage now, leaning on the low stone walls and looking curiously at the farmyards and homesteads, the wide-open porches and windows. Sometimes the dogs yapped at her, but after sniffing her and evidently recognizing one of their own, returned to lie in the sun on the earth benches. Now she proceeded slow as could be, step by step, barely breathing from both the effort and heartfelt joy.

Moving quietly as the wind that blew now and then across the pond and rummaged among the alder's ruddy catkins, she was grey and invisible as the fences or the earth, now dry in patches, or like the thin shade cast across the ground by the bare trees, so that no one seemed to notice her at all.

Agata rejoiced with her whole heart to find everything just the way she'd left it back in autumn.

They were surely cooking breakfast, for chimneys were smoking, and here and there the smell of boiled potatoes wafted through the open windows.

Despite the children's fitful shouts and the alarmed honking of geese minding their goslings, it was oddly quiet and empty in the village.

The sun, busy sowing its pure gold and looking at itself in the pond, was already halfway to noon, and still no one was hastening to the fields, no cart clattered from out of the yards, nor did any plough creak as it was pulled to the field.

'Have they all left for market, or what?' she thought, looking even more keenly at the houses.

The new wood of the Voyt's barn stood yellow among the leafless gardens, while beside it the roof battens could be seen like naked ribs through the tattered thatch of the Gulbases' place.

'Wind tore it away, and the lazybones can't be bothered to fix it!' she muttered.

Nearby, at the Pryczeks' crooked old cottage, bunches of straw poked out in place of broken panes.

And here was the Soltys's cottage, gable to the street, in the old-fashioned way.

Beyond him the Ploszkas' house, occupied on both sides.

Then the Balcereks' property: she'd recognize it anywhere for the house was sizeable and the lasses had sprinkled the grey walls with lime and painted the window frames blue.

And over there, in a wide old orchard sprawled the cottage of the Borynas, Lipce's first and wealthiest farmers. The clean windowpanes glittered in the sun; the walls shone as though freshly whitewashed; in the ample yard the outbuildings stood in a row, so fine and straight that few cottages could compare. All the fencing was fixed and such order everywhere that no Hollander⁵ could better it.

Further on the Goląbs' house.

And others, all of whom she knew as well as a prayer by heart. But everywhere was similarly quiet and empty, with only a red quilt to be seen here and there, airing in the gardens among the garments, or a woman in just her smock, digging the beds.

Cabbages were already sprouting green braids from their rotting heads in secluded corners and at the foot of walls. The pale fangs of lilies poked through the grey earth, seedlings were coming up under their cover of blackthorn twigs and the trees were covered in swollen sticky buds. Everywhere under the fences burgeoned nettles and all kinds of weeds, while the gooseberry bushes were wreathed in bright, fresh green leaves.

And though this truest of springs had been sown straight from the heavens and throbbed in every clod of swollen earth, yet things seemed sad in Lipce, quiet and strangely empty.

There was not a whisper of a man anywhere. They must have gone to the law court, or been summoned to some meeting. So she reasoned to herself, entering the wide, open church.

Mass was over already, the priest was hearing a confession. A few dozen people from other villages were sitting, quiet and absorbed, in the pews, so that only the occasional deep sigh echoed in the church or some louder word of prayer.

Threads of blue smoke from the burning lamp hanging on a cord before the great altar rose towards the high window through which the sunlight tumbled; sparrows chirruped beyond the panes, sometimes flying into the nave with straw in their beaks, or swallows swooped through the great doors with a twitter and blundered, circling, in the quiet and coolness of the church before escaping swiftly into the bright world.

She said a quick short prayer, for she was impatient to get to the Kląbs' now, but right in front of the church she came face to face with Jagustynka.

'Agata!' cried the other with considerable surprise.

'Still alive, mistress! Still alive!' Agata made to kiss her hand.

'And they were saying you'd given up the ghost somewhere in warmer lands ... But I see the Lord's bread has done nothing for you – you look to have one eye on the priest's byre ...' Jagustynka said mockingly, looking her over.

'You say true, mistress ... for I barely dragged my bones here ... I'll get there soon enough, bit by bit, I will ...'

'You're hurrying to the Kląbs?'

'Where else? Kin after all ...'

'They'll be glad to see you, with those fine little bags you're lugging. There must be a grosz or two knotted in your bundles, so aye, they'll willingly own you as kin.'

'Are they well? Do you know?' These little barbs were disheartening.

'Well ... only Tomek sickened a little, so that now he's taking the cure in the clink.'

'A Kląb! Tomasz! That's not funny!'

'It's as I've said and he's not alone, what's more, but in good company, the whole village in fact ... Your morgen won't help you when the law nails you and sticks you behind bars.'

'Jesus, Mary, Holy Joseph!' she moaned, standing stockstill in astonishment.

'Get off quick as you can to Tomek's wife and you'll have your fill of news sweeter than honey. He, he! The lads are having a fine holiday!' She laughed scornfully and her wicked eyes flashed with malice.

Agata plodded off, stunned, still unable to believe what she'd heard. She met a few women she knew, who greeted her with a kind word, chatting of this and that, but so shaken was she and filled with growing alarm, she was unable to take in a word they said. She slowed her steps deliberately, to delay having the painful news confirmed, and sat a long while by the presbytery picket fence, staring blankly at the priest's house. A stork stood on the porch on one leg and seemed to be keeping an eye on the dogs that frolicked along the garden's yellow paths, while Ambrozy and some girl were stacking new turf around the sides of a flowerbed already ruddy as an iron brush and dotted with of all kinds of emerging blooms.

Finally mustering her strength, she furtively turned into the Kląb homestead that stood just next to the presbytery.

Trembling now, she made her way, clinging to the fences, her eyes darting about the orchard and cottage set deep within, but she saw only the cows, slurping loudly from pails under the windows, and looking through the wide-open porch to the back of the house, she could see the sow with piglets wallowing in the mud of the yard and the chickens scratching zealously in the dirt.

Picking up an empty pail, for she felt bolder coming in with something in her hand, she slipped into the great gloomy chamber.

'Praised be!' she barely choked out the words.

'For ever amen! Who's that?' came the hesitant response a moment later from the storeroom.

'Why, it's me, Agata!' Jesus, how the words caught in her breast!

'Agata! Well did you ever! Agata!' babbled Klębowa, appearing on the threshold with an apronful of squealing goslings, the older ones hurrying behind her, hissing and honking. 'Well, praise God! And people were saying you'd died back at Yuletide, but no one knew how. My husband was even about to head off to the chancellery for news. Sit you down ... you must be weary. The geese are only just hatching ...'

'They've done beautiful, since there are so many!'

'Nigh on three-score less five. Come outside, for they need feeding and watching so the old 'uns don't trample 'em.'

She plucked the new goslings carefully from her apron and placed them on the ground, until they swarmed like bright yellow buttons while the mothers began honking joyfully and stretching their beaks towards them.

Klębowa fetched a little board with some finely chopped egg mixed with nettles and groats on it and squatted down carefully next to them, for the older ones were pecking the younger ones, trampling and stealing whatever food they could, provoking a furious uproar.

'They'll all be saddleback geese,' Agata remarked, sitting down on the earth bench.

'Indeed, they've a fine pedigree. The organist's wife swapped eggs with me. I gave three of mine for one of hers ... It's good you've arrived ... There's that much work, there's no knowing what to turn your hand to first.'

'I'll soon set to, I will. Let me just gather myself ... I've been poorly and quite lost my strength ... but let me just catch my breath ... and soon ...'

She wanted to get up, to go ... to set about some task, but the poor wretch just stumbled against the wall, then dropped back with a moan.

'You're right worn out, I see, you're not for working now, oh no!' Klębowa said more quietly, searching the livid face, the swollen and oddly shrunken figure. She was perturbed by the sight and fearful that not only would she have no assistance, but new troubles were ready to latch on to her.

Agata surely sensed it, for timidly, apologetically, she piped up:

'Don't you worry, I won't be taking up space or pushing my way to the bowl, no, I'll just catch my breath and go ... I just wanted to see everyone ... ask after 'em ... but I'll be off ...' The tears rushed to her eyes.

'I'm not after chasing you out. Sit down, and if you want to go, you can go ...'

'And how are the boys? Happen in the fields with Tomek?' she asked eventually.

'Don't you know? Why, they're all in the prison!'

Agata only wrung her hands in a voiceless cry of pain.

Jagustynka said already, but I couldn't believe it.'

'She told you God's truth, for that's how it is, yes!' She drew herself up at the memory, and heavy tears scattered down her drawn face.

Agata gazed at her as at a picture, not daring to question her.

'My Jesus, it was like Judgement Day here in the village, when they took them all to the town, like the final hour had come, I tell you – it's a wonder that I'm still living to see the light of day! It'll be three whole weeks tomorrow, and I can still see it as though it were yesterday. Only Maciek is at home, you know, and the lass, who's taken the manure to the fields, and me, poor wretch! ... Off with you! Scum ... trampling your own children like swine!' she yelled suddenly at the geese: '*Pilusie, pilu, pilu, pilu!*'

She was calling the goslings, for the whole flock, the mother geese at its head, had set off for the farmyard.

'Let them play; there's no gap to be seen, so they'll not escape – I'll keep a good lookout.'

'You cannot move – how will you go chasing goslings!'

'My sickness has passed a little, since I stepped over this threshold.'

'Watch 'em, then ... I'll get you a bite ... or maybe boil some milk?'

'God bless you, mistress, but it's a fasting Saturday, so I cannot be taking milk ... just a mug of hot water. I have some bread, I'll crumble it in and that'll be grand.'

Kłębowa soon brought her some salted boiled water in a bowl, into which the old woman crumbled her bread and ate it slowly, blowing on the spoon, while the other sat herself down on the threshold. With one eye on the goslings, pecking along the fences, she again began to relate what had happened:

'It were over the wood. The squire sold it to the Jews, hiding it from Lipce. They soon set about felling it! Such an injury it were and no justice to be had, so what were Lipce folk meant to do? Where could they go with their complaint? And what's more he took against all our folk and wouldn't give a single one of our hired hands work. They got together and the whole village went to defend its own, as many folk as could be found. They said they couldn't all be punished, if it came to it, but no one thought on it, for why would they? What were they to be punished for? It was their own rights they were demanding. They went to the clearing and beat up the woodcutters, since they didn't back off willingly. They beat up the manor lot and chased 'em all out o' the wood ... Put their foot down, and justly so, for no one's got the right to touch the wood until it's divided up as to who owns what. But so many of our lot were hurt – they brought old Boryna back with his head split. The woodsman butchered him, and then Antek Boryniak beat yon to death on account of his father!'

'Jesus! Beat him, to death?!'

'To death, and the old man's ill to this day and lying there all but dead. Aye, he came off worst of all, but others got it too. Dominikowa's Szymek had a broken leg. Mateusz Gołab was that battered they had to cart him back. The Płoszkas' Stach had his head split, and others suffered plenty – there's no remembering who got what! No one were that bothered nor complained, for they'd made their point, and they returned in full voice, singing like they'd won a war, drank all night for joy in the inn, and brought vodka round the houses for those badly beaten.

'And on the third day or thereabouts, on the Sunday, a wet snow fell and there were such a bluster from first thing in the morning that it were hard to poke your nose out the door. We were just getting ready for church, when the Gulbas boys started yelling round the village: "Gendarmes coming!"

'In the space of a prayer there were thirty-odd of 'em and officials and the whole court, and they set up at the presbytery. Well, the goings-on when they started adjudging, questioning, making notes, and all the folk one after another were put under arrest ... No one resisted, they were all sure of their ground, and everyone swore like it were confession and told the honest truth. They weren't finished till evening and wanted to take the whole village at once, along with the women, but there were such shouting and children crying that the men started looking round for staffs ... The good father must have explained something to the gendarmes, as they let us be, didn't even take Kozłowa, who'd been threatening everyone. They took only the men to the lock-up, and as for Boryna's Antek, they ordered him to be bound!'

'Jesus! Ordered to be bound!'

'And he was, but he ripped apart the bonds like rotten threads, till they all took fright, for he looked like he'd lost his mind or were possessed. There he stood, right in front of 'em, and says straight to their faces: "Clap me in chains and watch me well, for I'll kill you all and do myself in too ..."

'He were still that stunned they'd killed his father that he stretched his arms and feet out for the irons himself, and they took him away ...'

'Merciful Jesus! Mary!' moaned Agata.

'It's right before my eyes, always, and I'll not forget to my dying day how they took them away ...

'They took my husband and the boys ... They took the Płoszkas ... They took the Pryczeks ... They took the Gołabs ... They took the Wachniaks ... They took the Balcereks ... They took the Sochas ... And so many others they took, more than fifty men they drove to prison ...

'It's beyond the telling what went on hereabouts ... the terrible crying, the lamenting and shouting ... not to speak of the terrible cursing.

'And here's spring come upon us, the snows melting quickly away, the fields a-drying, the land begging to be worked – time to plough, time to sow, time for all manner of work, and no one to do it! Only the Voyt's left, the blacksmith, and some old codgers that can hardly move, and of the farmhands just the one weak in the head, Contrary Jasiek!

'And now it's littering time for the animals. Some have already begun – the cows are calving, fowl hatching everywhere. Then there's the men to think on and food to be taken, a grosz or two and a clean shirt, and that much work on hand that you don't know where to start. There's no managing alone, and you cannot hire from other villages, for everyone must do their own first ...'

'Will they not let them out quick?'

'God knows when! The priest drove over to the offices, the Voyt went, and they say that when the investigating's done they'll let 'em go, that the court'll come later. But it's been three weeks now, and not one of 'em back. Rocho too went Thursday last to find out more.'

'Is Boryna still living?'

'Alive, but barely gasping and not in his right mind, lying lifeless as a brick ... Hanka had doctors come, good ones – it were no use ...'

'Aye, doctors won't help if someone's mortal ill!'

They fell silent, exhausted by these recollections. Kłębowa gazed across the garden towards the distant poplar road leading to the town, and sobbed quietly, wiping her nose frequently ... Then, bustling about preparing dinner, she related at length all that had happened in the village through the winter and of which Agata knew nothing.

The old woman spread her hands and doubled over to the very ground in horror and astonishment at these bits of news that rained down upon her like stones and filled her soul with such pain and anguish that she began to sob quietly.

'Dear Lord, out in the world I were always thinking of Lipce, but such goings-on never even crossed my mind ... My whole long life I've never heard such things! Has wickedness settled here for good or what?'

'Aye, it seems that way!'

'Or maybe God's scourge for people's wickedness and sins!'

'Surely, what else. The Lord Jesus punishes mortal sins at least, like Antek's with his stepmother. And new sins there are, right in front of everyone's eyes!'

Fearing to ask anything more, Agata lifted her trembling hand and began to cross herself hurriedly and mutter a heated prayer!

'Such misfortune has befallen all the folk and there's Boryna lying as though dead, and they do say,' Kłębowa lowered her voice, glancing fearfully about her, 'that Jagusia has now taken up for good with the Voyt ... There's no Antek, nor Mateusz neither, nor any of the other lads, so the first to hand will do, so long as he pleases her ... Oh, what a world, what a world!' she moaned, wringing her hands in dismay.

The old woman made no reply now. Feeling suddenly weary and so overwhelmed with all this news, she trudged to the byre to rest.

It wasn't until dusk that they saw her traipsing to the village to see her friends, and when she returned, the Kłąbs were already sitting at their evening bowls.

A spoon was waiting for her and a place, not the first, but not the least either, since it was beside Kłębowa. She ate but little, like a fussy child, chatting quietly about the world, or the pilgrim places she'd been to, until they couldn't have been more astonished.

When night had fallen so that even the glow of sunset on the windowpanes had faded and the village was completely silent and they'd lit a lamp in the chamber and were slowly preparing for bed, Agata opened her little bags under the light and took out all manner of things she'd brought. They crowded around her in a tight circle, holding their breaths; it was a wonder they didn't devour her with their burning eyes.

First of all, she gave each one a holy picture, then beads for the lasses – so lovely that the colours shimmered and there was instant uproar in the chamber as they pushed their way to the mirror, trying the beads on, admiring themselves, arching their necks like puffed-up turkeys. Then sturdy penknives for the lads were found, real gelding knives,⁶ and a whole packet of *makhorka*⁷ for Tomasz, and finally for Kłębowa she took out a wide frilled collar, edged with coloured thread so that the woman almost clapped her hands with satisfaction ...

Everyone was mightily pleased as they looked over these treasures, feasting their eyes on the gifts, and Agata, much gratified, took great delight in telling what everything cost and where it was bought.

They sat long into the night, talking of those absent.

'It's that quiet in the village it fair stops your throat with terror!' Agata remarked finally when there was a pause in the talk and a lifeless, hollow silence fell. 'In past years at this time in spring, the whole place were shaking with shouts and laughter!'

'Aye, the whole village seems like an open grave, fit to roll a stone over it and stick up a cross ... There won't even be a soul to say a prayer or have a Mass said ...' Kłębowa agreed sadly.

'True! Forgive me, mistress, but I'd like to go upstairs. My bones ache after my journey and my eyes are closing.'

'Lie down wherever you fancy, there's room enough.'

The old woman gathered her bags and had set about climbing the ladder to the loft, when Kłębowa called after her through the open hatch:

'Ha! But I almost forgot to say that we took your quilt from the chest ... Marcycha were ill during Shrovetide with the pox ... it were that cold there were nothing to cover her with ... so we borrowed it from you ... The quilt is aired and, come tomorrow, it'll be back upstairs ...'

'The quilt ... as you please ... aye, since it were needed ... aye ...'

Something caught so at her throat that she broke off; she felt her way to the chest, crouched down and lifting the lid began, with trembling hands, hurriedly to fumble and feel around for her deathbed dowry ...

Aye ... the quilt was gone ... and she'd left a quite new one ... in clean covers ... not once used ... Why, she'd picked the feathers, found on the pastures, one by one herself ... to be sure to have it for the hour of dying ... Taken ... taken, it was ... Such grief-stricken weeping overwhelmed her it was a wonder her heart didn't burst. She prayed a long time, watering her prayers with bitter tears. Long did she weep and painfully and quietly complain to dear Jesus of the wrong done her ... It must have been the middle of the night, for the cocks began to crow for midnight or perhaps to herald change.

CHAPTER 2

The next day was Palm Sunday.

It was bright, though well before the sun was high, when Hanka looked out of Boryna's cottage, dressed in her woollen skirt and a shawl against the sharp frost.

She went right to the fences to look down the black road. Drunk with dew and dusted with frost here and there, it was empty still, with not a sign of life. Only a dry sunrise shimmered, tingeing the dead tips of the trees blue, while the remains of the night lurked timidly under the fences.

Returning to the porch, she knelt down with difficulty – for she was barely a week away from her time – and began to say her prayers, her sleepy gaze roaming the world outside.

The white blaze of day spread slowly, meanwhile, and the dawn's rays filtered as through a sieve, scattering light over the east and climbing higher, like a golden baldachin above a shining, though still invisible monstrosity.

After the cold night, everything glittered with frost – fences, bridges, roofs and stones – and the trees looked like bleached clouds.

Submerged in low-lying shadows, the village slept on, so that only a cottage or two closest to the road stood out with their bright whitewashed walls, and over the misted glossy surface of the pond currents trailed in long dark threads of molten lacquer.

The ceaseless rumbling of the mill could be heard in the distance, and the faint hushed babble of an unseen little river teeming over rocks and stones.

The cockerels were now crowing fit to burst and all manner of birds were quietly conferring in the gardens roundabout as though in common prayer, when Hanka suddenly came to. Sleep was still tormenting her and her exhausted weary bones were luring her back under the quilt, but she didn't give in. Rubbing her eyes with hoar frost and picking up where she'd broken off praying, she went into the yard to look over the holding and wake the sleepers.

First she opened the door to the young pig, who was straining to stand on his back legs but, being so enormously stout, simply rolled on to his fat behind and pointed his grunting snout towards her as she scraped up his feed and threw in something fresh.

'Your hams are that heavy it's hard on your legs: there's at least four fingers o' fat here.' She poked his sides with satisfaction.

Then she opened up the chicken coop, tossing a handful of pigfeed on to the threshold to lure them out, so that they flew down from their perches eagerly and the cockerels began to crow loudly.

The geese, housed alongside, met her with honks and hissing. She chased off the ganders, as they were soon at war with the chickens, and began pulling out eggs from under the hens sitting on their nests and examined them under the light.

'They'll start hatching any time now,' she thought, listening to the quiet, barely discernible pecking inside each egg.

Łapa too scrambled out of his kennel as she headed for the stable; he stretched and yawned, ignoring the hissing ganders.

'Hah! Lazybones, sleeping through the night like a farmhand instead o' keeping guard!'

The dog wagged his tail, barking joyfully, and charged at the chickens until the feathers flew before tearing after Hanka, jumping up to her chest and licking her hands so that, like it or not, she had to stroke his head.

'This creature's got more feeling than many a man! The rascal knows who's master!' She straightened up a little, casting her eyes over the frosted roofs and the swallows twittering gently as they sat in a row along the ridges.

'Pietrek! It's broad day!' she shouted, beating her fist on the door of the stable, and hearing a growl in response and the bolt sliding, she opened the next door, to the byre.

The cows were lying in a row before their mangers.

'Witek! Little monster's sleeping like he's back from a wedding!'

The boy woke up immediately, leapt down from the bunk and began hurriedly to pull on his tattered breeches and mutter something in alarm.

'Chuck the cows more hay so they're done feeding by milking, and come on inside quick to scrub the potatoes. Not Patch – let her mind the beast herself,' she added sternly, for that was Jagna's cow.

'Oh aye, she minds her that well the cow's bellowing with hunger and eating the straw from under her.'

'She can drop dead – it's not my loss!' Hanka whispered implacably.

Witek muttered something more, but as soon as she'd gone, he slumped back on his bed, gripping a toggle, to doze a bit longer.

Meanwhile, Hanka went on to the barn where the potatoes were heaped, covered in straw, picked over for planting. She peeped into the shed where all the farming tools were kept, with Łapa jumping about in front of her, swerving to skirmish with the geese now and then. When she'd checked everything, as she did every day, to make sure nothing had come to harm in the night, she went off to the stile to look at the winter wheat in the fields.

Once again she resumed her interrupted prayer.

The sun was high now, its flames gusting across the gardens, so that the frost glittered and the dew began to drip from the trees. The wind picked up too, rummaging gently among the branches, a torrent of song burst from the larks, and there was movement along the village roads, the splash of water being drawn from the pond and, here and there, the creak of a rusty gate opening. Geese were cackling somewhere, dogs were barking and people's voices carried in the morning stillness.

The village was waking a little later, for it was Sunday and everyone was glad to rest their work-worn bones under the quilt a little longer.

Sunk into herself and entwined in many thoughts, Hanka heeded none of it; only her lips moved in prayer, for her soul was far away and she was lost in recollections.

She raised her peaceful eyes, brimming with joy, to gaze at the wide fields encircled by a wall of distant forest, over which dawn poured in a sea of flame and thick old amber-coloured pines sparkled among blue thickets; the whole land seemed to tremble in the rousing golden light. The newly sprouted winter grain had tucked a greenish wool about the strips and, here and there along the furrows, rivulets of water shone like silver shavings. A cold damp breath rose from the fields, in that holy hush of springtime in which everything grows and emerges into the world ...

But that was not what she was gazing at, nor why.

All the memories rose in her, of hunger, woes and grievances, Antek's infidelities, pain sharp as a nail and so much sorrow and strife that she was astonished she'd overcome it all and had lived to see the day the Lord Jesus had turned everything to the good ...

For she was back on the farm again, on the land ...

And who was there strong enough ever to tear her away now? Good luck with that!

She'd borne so much, suffered more in half a year than some their whole lives through, that now she could bear whatever the Lord Jesus saw fit to load upon her. She would endure, and live to see Antek steady, and these lands would be theirs for all the years to come.

Three whole weeks, and yet it seemed like yesterday that the villagers had set off to the woods ...

Hanka hadn't gone with the others; it was hard in her condition and dangerous ...

She was agitated only over Antek, for they told her straight away that he'd not gone, not joined the rest. She supposed he'd done it on purpose, against the old man, or maybe to meet with Jagna somewhere in the meantime ...

It ate at her, but she wasn't going to go spying.

And then just before noon, young Gulbas had come running and yelling, 'We beat the manor! We beat 'em!' and ran on like a madman.

She and Kłębowa had decided to go out and meet them when Dominikowa's boy came running up, shouting from afar:

'Boryna's done for, Antek's done for, Mateusz and the rest of 'em!' He waved his arms and muttered something before collapsing, and they'd had to prise his teeth apart with a knife to tip some water down his throat, so exhausted was he.

And Hanka's soul had turned to stone with fright.

Fortunately, even before they'd revived the boy, others poured on to the road from the wood and began telling what had happened. In the space of a prayer she herself saw Antek alive beside his father's cart, in which the old man lay livid as a corpse, covered in blood and almost unconscious.

Aye, the tears had sprung to her eyes and the pain was tearing her apart, but she pulled herself together, for her father, old Bylica, had drawn her aside and said quietly:

'The old man'll soon die, Antek is out of his mind, and there's no one at Boryna's. The blacksmith'll end by moving in and no one will get him out again!'

Marking his words, she sped at once to the cottage, snatched up the children and whatever clothes were close to hand, leaving the rest in Weronka's care, and moved quick as can be to her old place, on the other side of Boryna's cottage.

Ambrozy was still nursing Boryna, people had not yet dispersed, the whole village was still bubbling with joy or groaning over its wounds when Hanka quietly moved into the cottage and settled there for good.

She watched over the place diligently: for this was Antek's land too, and here was the old man barely gasping, ready to peg out at any moment.

It was clear after all that it would be hard to dislodge whoever seized the inheritance and got their claws into it first, and they would have the law behind them. What did she care about the blacksmith's shouts and the threats with which he forbade her entry, sorely angered that she'd forestalled him! Whose permission did she need! She clutched at the land, standing guard over it and defending her own like a bitch shielding her young, certain the old man would soon die and that they would take Antek away, for Rocho had warned her.

Where was she to turn for protection, then? For it was clear that God would not help those who did not help themselves. Crying and whining would gain you nothing, what mattered were these sharp, relentless claws – she'd already learned this, she had! So even though they'd taken Antek, she quickly calmed down, for what can a human being do in the face of fate? What can a poor wretch lean on? Where was there time for lamenting and complaining when she'd taken such a farmstead upon her shoulders!

Why, she'd been left lonely as a shrub at a windy crossroads, but she didn't falter in the face of hard work or shrink before anyone. And here was Jagna opposing her; the blacksmith and company dead set against her, God help her; there was the Voyt with designs on Jagna and thus energetic in her cause; even the priest was against her, urged on by Dominikowa. Even so they couldn't overcome her. Hanka gave in to nothing. Each day she sank roots deeper into the ground and held everything more firmly in her grip, so that before two weeks had gone by, everything ran according to her will and direction.

All the while, she merely snatched at food and sleep and rest, working like an ox in harness from dawn until late at night. Except that since she was unused to the work and to putting her head to every matter, as well as greatly timid by nature and cowed by Antek, it came so hard to her sometimes that she'd throw up her hands.

But fear that they'd evict her from the farm spurred her, that and her bitterness towards Jagna. In any case, wherever her strength came from, it was enough that she did not give in, and was growing in the eyes of everyone, to their wonder and respect.

'Well, well! She looked like she wouldn't say boo to a goose, and now she manages as well as a man,' the first women of the village said of her, so that even Ploszkowa and others were happy to court her friendship, willing to help with a kind word and in any other way they could.

Aye, she accepted with a grateful heart, though she kept her distance and took little joy in their favour, for she could not easily forget recent wrongs. She did not like idle chatter, so she had no truck with neighbourly gossip nor with standing about in the yards, backbiting. Didn't she have troubles enough of her own, without worrying over other people's?

She suddenly thought of Jagna, with whom she waged a fierce, silent and relentless war. Jagna, the very thought of her was like a stab in the heart, so that she leapt up now, crossing herself hurriedly and beating her breast as she finished her prayers. She grew even more annoyed to find that everyone in the cottage was still sleeping and it was quiet in the yard. She berated Witek, roused Pietrek from his bed, and Józka got a scolding too, for here was the sun a man high and the girl was still lazing in bed.

'You look away for a second and they're all snoring in corners!' she muttered to herself as she set about lighting the stove.

Hanka took the children on to the porch and pushed a chunk of bread into each of their hands. She called for Łapa to play with them and then went to look in on Boryna.

But it was still completely quiet on Father's side, so she slammed the door angrily. It did not wake Jagna, though, and the old man was just as she'd left him the previous evening. The ashen, unshaven face that lay against the red-striped bedding had grown so gaunt and fixed that Boryna resembled one of those saints carved in wood, while his wide-open eyes stared straight ahead, motionless, seeing nothing at all. His head was wound in rags, and his hands, fingers spread wide, lay limp at each side like half-broken branches.

She adjusted the bedding, pulling the quilt further down towards his feet as it was hot in the chamber, and then she tipped a little fresh water between his lips. He drank slowly, and his throat moved, but he remained immobile, lying still as a felled log. There was a glimmer only in his eyes, like the brief flash of a river at night. Sighing over him despairingly, she gave the bucket a kick with her clog, darting an enraging glance at the sleeping woman in the other bed.

But she failed to wake Jagna. The girl lay on her side, facing the room. She'd pushed the quilt halfway down her breast in the heat so that her arms and neck lay bare, flushed and moving gently as she breathed. Her teeth shone like the whitest beads through parted cherry-red lips, and her loosened hair cascaded across the white pillow, streaming down to the floor like the purest linen drying in the sun.

'I'd like to rip the face off you, then you wouldn't be lordling it over others with your looks!' whispered Hanka with such hatred that she felt a stab in her heart and her hands clenched of their own accord. Smoothing her own hair automatically instead, she glanced at the mirror hanging in the window frame and quickly recoiled at the sight of her own thin, yellow mottled face and reddened eyes.

'She's no worries, just stuffs her face, sleeps in the warm, bears no children – how's she not going to look pretty!' she thought with such bitterness that she slammed the door so hard on leaving the windowpanes hummed. Jagna woke up at last. The old man was still lying motionless, gazing into space. He had lain this way for three whole weeks since they'd brought him back from the forest. Sometimes it seemed as though he were waking. He would call to Jagna, take hold of her hands, wanting to say something, but then he'd freeze again without saying a single word.

Rocho had already brought a doctor from town, who'd looked at the old man, scribbled something down, taken ten roubles. Nor was the medicine cheap, and it helped no more than what Dominikowa supplied for free.

They soon realized that he'd not emerge from this and so left him in peace. It was a known fact that when someone was mortally ill, it didn't matter what the doctor came up with; die Boryna must, and if he were meant to get well, he would, with no one's help.

So now they were properly harried, what with changing the soaking rags round his head, and feeding him nowt but water or a little milk, since he seemed unable to eat and would bring everything up.

People marked too, and Ambrozj most of all with his great experience, that if Boryna did not return to his senses soon, his death would come quick and easy. They expected it any day, but it did not come, until the long waiting grew tedious, for he had to be watched and cared for even so.

It was Jagna's dubious right to care and slave away beside him – but how, when she couldn't abide it for even an hour in the cottage? She was sick to the back teeth of the old man and worn out by constant war with Hanka, who pushed her aside at every turn and kept an eye on her as though she were worse than a thief. It was no wonder she longed to get out, to run off in the warm afternoon, among people, at liberty, so she foisted the task on to Józka and went who knew where, sometimes not returning until evening ...

Józka, meanwhile, watched him for as long as people were about; she was a silly lass still, and flighty.

So Hanka had to take everything upon her own shoulders and care for the sick man, for though the blacksmith and his wife looked in ten times a day, it was merely to check she wasn't making off with anything, and they were mainly waiting in case the old man spoke and maybe parcelled out his property.

They tussled over it like dogs around a dying sheep, growling and jostling to be first to sink their fangs into its guts and wrest a morsel for themselves. Meanwhile, whatever the blacksmith spied, whatever he got his mitts on, he snatched away. Hanka would even have to tear some old halter or plank from his grasp and watch his every step, so that not a day went by without quarrels and fierce fulminations.

The Lord favours those who are early to rise, they say, and true enough, but the blacksmith was ready to rise at midnight and dash a distance of ten villages if it meant making money; the man was greedy for groszy and niggardly as no other.

Why even now, when Jagna was barely out of bed and still half dressed, the door creaked and in he slipped quietly, going straight to the sick man.

'Has he said anything?' He peered into his eyes.

'He's lying there same as he was!' she snapped back, gathering her hair under her scarf.

Jagna was still barefoot, in her smock, a little sleepy and so lovely, radiating such sultry warmth and charm, that he ran his narrowed eyes over her.

'You know,' he shifted closer, 'the organist let slip to me that the old man must have plenty of cash about, for right before Yuletide he meant to lend some man from Debica a whole five hundred roubles, but they couldn't decide at what per cent. That money must be hidden somewhere in the cottage ... You watch Hanka carefully, for if she grabs it before us, nobody'll get a sight of it ... You could slowly, secretly look in all the crannies, but make sure no one notices ... Are you listening?'

'Why wouldn't I be!' she covered her arms with her apron, for it was as though he were groping her with those thieving eyeballs of his.

He prowled about the chamber and looked with feigned indifference behind the pictures, hunting keenly wherever he could.

'Do you have the key to the storeroom?' His eyes darted to the small closed door.

'Hanging from the crucifix by the window.'

'I lent him a chisel, must be a month since, and now I need it and it's nowhere to be found. I think it must have been chucked in there, in all the stuff ...'

'Find it yourself, I'm not poking around for it.'

On hearing Hanka's voice in the hallway, he stepped away from the door, hung the key back in its place and picked up his cap.

'Well, I'll look in tomorrow ... I must be off home ... Is Rocho back?'

'How do I know? Ask Hanka!'

The blacksmith stood there a little longer, scratching his red moustache, his eyes darting like thieves into every corner of the room. He then smiled to himself and left.

Jagna threw off her apron and set about making the bed and tidying up, giving her husband an occasional sidelong glance, careful always to avoid his ever-open eyes as she moved about the room.

True, she was repulsed by him, feared and hated him with all her might for the wrongs she'd suffered, and whenever he called her and took hold of her with his feverish sticky hands, she shrank with disgust and fear at the corpse-like stench of death he gave off, but despite everything she was perhaps the only one who truly wished he would get well.

It was only now she realized what she would lose were he not there. She had felt like the mistress of the house beside him; everyone listened to her, and the other women and lasses had to show respect and surrender first place to her whether they liked it or not – as it should be! She was Boryna's wife, after all. Maciej, meanwhile, though prickly as a dog at home and without a kind word for her, had been mightily solicitous in front of others and taken great care that no one dared to disrespect her.

She hadn't understood it before. It wasn't until Hanka had barged in and taken the upper hand, pushing her aside, that she felt herself forsaken and mistreated.

It was not the land after all – what did she care for fortune? It meant as much to her as last year's summer. Even though she'd grown used to being in charge and was mightily pleased to boast and flaunt her wealth, taking pleasure in her own station, she'd shed no tears over it, for she'd been perfectly happy at her mother's. The one thing that pained her deeply was having to give way to Hanka, to Antek's wife: that stung her to the quick, provoking her anger and a desire to be contrary.

True, her mother incited her, and the blacksmith worked on her with his daily provocations, for, left to herself, she might soon have given way. These wars so disgusted her that sometimes she wanted to throw it all over and move back to her mother's.

'Don't you dare! Sit tight till he dies! Guard your own!' the old woman ordered sternly.

So she did, though she was unutterably sick of it – how could she not be? Whole days at a time there was no one to say a word to, or laugh with, or run out to meet ...

And inside there was the old man moaning, Hanka always ready for a scrap, endless conflict; it was almost unbearable.

And no less intolerable at her mother's.

So she flitted about the village with her distaff. But could she stand that either, when the place was full of screaming women with long, tear-stained faces, mewling like a March day, and from every side a ceaseless litany of complaints, and not a single lad to cheer you up!

She couldn't settle anywhere and didn't know what to do with herself.

And on top of that, more and more frequently, came the memories of Antek.

True, towards the end, before they took him, she'd cooled towards him greatly and those meetings were nothing but fear and torture to her; and finally he'd hurt her so badly that her soul heaved at the memory ... But at least she had someone to meet, she knew that every dusk he'd be there, by the hayrick, waiting and watching for her, that there was someone for whom it was a pleasure to hear her voice ... So though she shook with trepidation that she'd be spotted, and though he often yelled about the long wait, she'd come running willingly, forgetting the whole world when he pulled her close like a fiery dragon, and took her without asking permission ... How could she resist him when he squeezed her till she swooned deep down inside and overcame her with such ardour.

Often she couldn't sleep until midnight, cooling her face inflamed with kisses against the cold wall, churning deep inside, on fire down to her very bones with those sweet burning memories!

Now she was lonesome as a pin, no one to spy on her, no one to claim any rights over her, but nor was there anyone to long for, no one to wait for her now at the stile and no one to take her captive ...

If the Voyt pursued her, pinching her and whispering sweet nothings, if he pressed her against a fence or dragged her to the inn for a drink and would willingly have ensnared her for himself, she allowed it only because she was so thoroughly sick of everything and had no one else to laugh with, but beside Antek he was as a dog to a farmer!

And she also carried on to spite the whole village and Antek too.

He'd treated her with disdain and abused her in the end! Why – whole days and nights he'd sat by the old man's side, even sleeping on her bed, and barely took a step outside the room, but Jagna he seemed not to notice, though she stood before him constantly like a dog pleading for pity with its eyes.

He had not glanced at her, he had eyes only for his father and Hanka and the children, Łapa even.

Perhaps that's what drained her love away in the end, and everything in her turned, for when they took him away in chains, he seemed like someone else, a complete stranger and so indifferent she could barely pity him. She even watched Hanka with hidden pleasure as the other tore at her hair and beat her head against the wall and howled like a bitch for her drowned puppies.

She rejoiced vindictively in Hanka's anguish, turning her eyes away with disgust from Antek's terrible, half-deranged face. So alien had he seemed to her then that she could not even remember him now, like a person she'd seen only once.

But all the better did she recall that other Antek, the one from the days of love and madness, the days of trysts and caresses, kisses and ecstasies ... the one towards whom now, in the often wakeful nights, her soul strained and her heart, bursting with anguish, cried out in grief and untold longing.

That other Antek ... her soul yearned for those days of happiness, not knowing where he was and whether he was even alive, somewhere out there, in the wide world ... Even now he drifted through her mind like a delicious dream from which it was hard to wake, when again came the sound of Hanka's shrill voice.

'Yelling and nagging like a skinned dog!' she whispered, roused from her memories.

The sunlight was slanting in already, reddening the gloomy chamber, and the birds twittered joyfully in the garden. It was growing warmer, the frost dripped, melting from the roofs like glass beads, and through the open window the cries of geese flapping their wings in the pond came drifting in upon the morning breeze.

She flitted about the room like a goldfinch, humming quietly, for it was Sunday and nearly time to get ready for church with the palms. The shoots of red willow, covered in silvery catkins, had been standing ready in a jug since yesterday – a little wilted, since she'd forgotten to add water. She had started to revive them carefully, when Witek yelled through the door:

'Missus, they said yer to feed yer cow – it's fair bellowing with hunger!'

'Tell her: hands off my cow!' she yelled back at the top of her voice, listening to what the other would bark in reply.

'You can sound off for all you're worth: you won't get me angry today!'

She began calmly to take clothes out of the chest, spreading them on the bed and examining them, to see which to wear for church. All at once, like a cloud crossing the sun and darkening the whole world, she felt suddenly gloomy. For what was the point of adorning herself and dressing up? And for whom?

For the eyes of women, enviously assessing every ribbon and then dragging her over the coals for it?

She discarded the garments with distaste and, sitting in the window, began to comb her thick fair hair, gazing sadly at the village, all sunlit now and glittering in the melting dew. Here and there, houses glinted white among the orchards and pillars of bluish smoke spurted upwards from the chimneys. Meanwhile, on the road, on the other side of the pond and completely shielded by the trees, women were passing by, for she could see their red woollen skirts reflected in the water as they traversed the fading shadows of the trees at the water's edge. Then the geese crossed in white skeins, so that it seemed to her that they were swimming across the deep blue gulf of the reflected sky, leaving blackish, semicircular rings behind them like gently writhing snakes; or swallows flickered low, their white bellies shining, and somewhere at the watering place cows bellowed or a dog barked.

Then she forgot all these as she turned to gaze upwards, high into the deep blue sky, where a flock of clouds was grazing like woolly white sheep. Somewhere beneath them birds flew at such a height they could not be seen and only their plaintive drawn-out cries echoed poignantly over the earth. Something caught at her breast, and suddenly the old longing clutched at her heart and she trailed listless eyes over the swaying trees and the water where the clouds seemed to swim, sunk in the blue, and over the whole world. She could make nothing out beyond that pent-up yearning. Heavy tears ran down her pale cheeks like the shining beads of a broken rosary and trickled slowly one after another, flowing to the very depths of her soul.

Could she tell what had come over her?

All she could feel was something wrenching her, taking wing, sweeping her away so that she'd go to the ends of the earth, wherever it took her, wherever that unshakeable longing led her. And she cried impulsively and almost painlessly, like a tree laden with blossom on a spring morning when the sun warms it and the wind rocks it and, weighed down with dew, it sinks its roots into the ground, swells with sap and offers its flowering branches to the sky ...

'Witek! Invite her ladyship to breakfast!' Hanka yelled again.

Jagna suddenly recovered, wiped away her tears, finished brushing her hair and hurried off.

In Hanka's room everyone was sitting down to breakfast. Potatoes were steaming in a basin; Józka was just garnishing them with soured cream and fried onions, while the rest were already digging in their spoons, feasting their greedy eyes on the food.

Hanka took first place in the middle of the bench at which they ate, Pietrek sat at the end and, next to him, Witek squatted on the ground. Meanwhile, Józka ate standing, supervising the serving, and the children sat by the stove around a sizeable bowl, using their spoons to chase away Łapa when he tried to steal their food.

Jagna's place was near the door, opposite Pietrek.

They ate slowly, glowering occasionally.

In vain did Józka chatter away nineteen to the dozen or Pietrek throw in a remark. Hanka joined in finally too, touched by her sad, tear-stained eyes; Jagusia uttered not a word.

'Witek, who gave you that bruise?' asked Hanka.

'I slipped against the manger!' He went red as a crab and rubbed the painful spot, glancing knowingly at Józka.

'Have you got the palm branch already?'

'I'll get it in a tick – I'll just finish,' he replied, eating up quickly.

Jagna put down her spoon and went out.

'Something's bitten her again!' murmured Józka, giving Pietrek more borscht.

'Not everyone can rattle away without stopping, like you. Has she milked the cow?'

'She took the pail, so she must have gone to the byre.'

'Hey, Józka, the grey needs some oilcake.'¹

'Yes, I saw today she were producing foremilk.'

'She is, so she'll calve any day ...'

'She'll have a bullock!' said Witek, getting up from his food.

'Idiot!' Pietrek muttered mockingly, loosening a button, since he'd eaten well. Lighting a cigarette from a firebrand, he followed the boy outside.

The women set about their work in silence. Józka washed the dishes, and Hanka made the beds.

'Will you go to church with the palms?'

'You go with Witek. Pietrek can go too – let him just see to the horses. I'll stay, watch Father and maybe Rocho will be back and bring some news of Antek ...'

'Should I tell Jagustynka, to come do the potatoes tomorrow? Eh?'

'Aye, we can't manage ourselves and they need picking over fast.'

'And the muck needs spreading!'

'Pietrek's to finish carting it by noon tomorrow, so after dinner Witek and him can spread it; if there's time enough, you can help ...'

The geese could be heard clamouring under the windows; Witek burst in, breathless.

'You don't even give the geese any peace!'

'They wanted to peck me, so I defended meself!'

He threw down a whole bunch of golden switches, sprinkled with catkins and still damp with dew. Józka began to arrange them, tying them with red wool.

'Did the stork peck you on the forehead?' she asked quietly.

'O' course, what else – don't you give me away ...' He looked round for the mistress, who was taking the best clothes out of the chest. 'I'll tell you how it was ... I saw it stays out on the porch at night ... so I creep up late, when everyone in the presbytery's sleeping ... and I'm just about to take it ... even though it's pecking ... I would've wrapped it in my spencer and carried it off ... when the dogs got wind of me ... they know me but the poxy things still had a go, so I had to run away, and they tore my trouser leg ... but I'll get that bird yet ...'

'And when the priest finds out you've taken the stork?'

'Who's going to tell him? ... It's mine and I'm taking it.'

'And how'll you hide it, so's they don't take it back?'

'I've got a place all thought up – even the gendarmes won't sniff it out ... and when they've all forgotten, I'll bring it back in and say I found a new one and tamed it – who'll recognize him, Józka? Only don't give me away, and I'll bring you some little birds and a young hare.'

'Am I a lad that I want birds to play with? Idiot. Get changed quick, we'll go to church together.'

'Will you let me carry the palm, Józka, eh?'

'Hark at him! ... Only women can take it up to be blessed!'²

'I'll give it back at church – just through the village ...'

He begged so hard that she promised, turning quickly to Nastka Gołębianka, who was just coming in, all dressed up for church, palms in hand.

'Have you had news of Mateusz?' asked Hanka, after greeting her.

'Only what the Voyt said yesterday: that he's better.'

'The Voyt knows as much as nothing or makes it up.'

'Priest said the same.'

'But he had nothing to tell about Antek.'

'Mateusz is with the others, but Antek's on his own.'

'He's just yapping so's to have something to talk about round the cottages ...'

'He was round at yours too!'

'He's round every day, but to see Jagna. He's got some business with her, so they get together and carry on in front of everyone in the yard.'

She spoke more quietly, emphasizing her words and looking out of the window, for Jagna was just coming out on the porch, all dressed up, palms and prayer book in hand. She gazed after her a long time.

'You'll be late, lasses. Road's chock-full with people.'

'Bell's not rung yet.'

But the bells soon began to peal, summoning folk to God's house and ringing low and long and loud.

In a prayer, everyone was gone from the cottage to church.

Hanka was left alone. After putting on the dinner and gathering herself up a little, she took the children outside and sat on the porch to comb and pick through their hair, since there was never time during the week.

The sun had now risen quite high and people everywhere were heading for church, spilling out gradually from the farmyards, the women's clothes glowing red like poppies, their chatter mingling with the shouts of children who were throwing pebbles into the water at the birds. Sometimes carts creaked by, full of people from other villages, or folk passed by with a greeting, even those from elsewhere, until everyone had slowly disappeared and the empty roads fell silent.

Having picked the children's hair clean, Hanka took them to play by themselves on the straw by the potato pit, while she checked the bubbling pans and went back to her former place, praying under her breath on a chaplet since she did not know how to pray from a book.

Noon was approaching. An almost festive silence had descended upon the village, and there was not a voice to be heard, only the chirping of sparrows and the twittering of swallows moulding nests under the eaves. It was warm, the early spring had barely nudged the earth or touched the trees. The sky hung fresh, flushed blue and strangely shimmering. The orchards stood motionless, stretching branches stiff with swollen buds to the sun, while the yellow catkins of the alders edging the pond stirred gently as though barely breathing, and the poplars' russet shoots, sticky and fragrant, as though leaking honey, opened in the light like fledglings' beaks ...

The cottage walls were nice and warm, so that the flies crawled upon them and sometimes even a bee was seen, humming around the daisies peeping from under the fences, or busying itself about bushes that were bursting with young leaves like green flames.

But a sharp damp wind was still blowing from the fields and woods.

The Mass was about halfway through, for the strains of distant singing, the organ and the faint sound of bells could be heard like torrential rain on the quiet air, which seemed to simmer with springtide.

Time drifted, slow and quiet, for when the sun was at its peak, even the birds fell silent, but for the crows which, preying thievishly on the goslings, hovered low about the pond, provoking the ganders. A stork clattered somewhere and flew close by, its great shadow sweeping over the ground.

Hanka prayed fervently, with one eye on the children, and looked in on the old man occasionally.

But he lay as always, motionless, staring straight ahead.

He was dying so slowly, approaching his time bit by bit, day by day, like spikes of wheat ripening in the sun, awaiting the sharp sickle ... He recognized no one, for even when he called Jagna and took her hands, his eyes looked far into the distance; it seemed to Hanka that only the sound of her own voice made him move his lips and his eyes dart as though he wanted to say something ...

And so it went on without change, until it brought those watching to tears.

My Jesus, who could have predicted it! Such a farmer, smart as can be, such a wealthy man, you'd be hard pressed to find another like him, and now he lay like a tree struck by lightning, still full of green branches, and already death's prey ...

For he'd neither died nor did he live, but was entirely at God's mercy.

O human fate, O fate intractable!

O power of divine destiny, which appears when least expected, whether in broad daylight or at dead of night – either way you drive a human mite in the direction of bitter death!

Musing upon the old man as she gazed mournfully at the sky, Hanka sighed once or twice and finished her chaplet before setting about the afternoon milking, for sighs were all very well, but work came first.

When she returned with full pails, everyone was back at the cottage. Józka recounted what the priest had said from the pulpit and who had been in church. It became noisy inside the cottage and on the porch, since a few of Józka's friends had come back with her and together they swallowed the blessed catkins, which were meant to guard against sore throats.

There was laughter aplenty, so that several of them found they couldn't swallow and choked until they were given water to drink or a thump on the back to make the catkins go down more easily, which Witek provided with great delight.

Only Jagna did not come back for dinner. They'd seen her go off with her mother and the blacksmith. They'd barely got up from their bowls when came Rocho, whom they leapt upon with joyful greetings, for he had become as dear to them as a grandfather born, and he greeted them quietly, with a word and a kiss on the head for each, but did not eat when offered food. He was sorely exhausted and looked anxiously about the chamber. Hanka watched his eyes, but did not dare question him.

'I've seen Antek!' he said quietly, not looking at anyone.

She started from her seat on the chest, fear seizing her and gripping her heart so that she couldn't choke out the words.

'He is quite well and of good cheer. The guard was watching but I talked with him a good hour.'

'Is he in them irons?' she managed to splutter fearfully.

'Of course not! ... He's just like the others! ... It's not so bad there – don't you worry.'

'Because Koziol said they beat 'em and chain 'em to the wall.'

'Maybe they do in other places ... for something else ... but they haven't touched Antek,' he said.

She wrung her hands with joy and flashed a smile like the sun.

'And on leaving he said that you were to slaughter the pig without fail, before Easter, because he wants a taste of the blessed food too.'³

'They're starving the poor wretch, they are!' she lamented.

'But Dad said he were going to sell the pig when it were fattened,' noted Józka.

'He did, but if Antek says to slaughter it, then his word comes before Father's,' she said in a sharp, adamant voice.

'And he said that you were to take charge of everything that needs doing in the fields, take no notice of anything. I told him how cleverly you were managing.'

'Did he say anything to that? Did he?' She was flushed with joy.

'He said that if you wanted, you could manage everything ...'

'Oh, I can, I can!' she whispered resolutely, her eyes glinting with purpose.

'So what's new?'

'Ah nothing, everything's as it was ... Will they let him go soon?' she asked with a shiver of dismay.

'Maybe right after Easter, maybe a little later, when the investigation's done ... And that will drag on, with it being a whole village, so many people ...' he replied evasively, avoiding her eyes.

'Did he ask about the cottage, the children ... me ... about everyone ...?' she began timidly.

'Aye, he asked. I told him, listing everything.'

'And ... about everyone in the village ...?'

She wanted terribly to know if he'd asked about Jagna too, but didn't dare ask directly. She tried to skirt about the matter, so that he might unwittingly come out with it, but she did not know how and the moment was lost, for news of Rocho's return had spread throughout the village and soon, even before vespers, the women began arriving, greatly curious to hear news of their men.

He went out to meet them in front of the house and, sitting on the earth bench, began telling what he'd learned of each one. Though he said nothing ill, the quiet sobbing of womenfolk began to grow in the crowd, sometimes loud weeping, and sometimes a cry of distress bursting out ...

Then he went off round the village, calling in at almost every house. With his white beard and eyes uplifted, he seemed like a holy statue, bringing a word of cheer everywhere he went, and the chambers seemed to fill with brightness, and hope blossomed in hearts and confidence strengthened the faltering. But tears flowed abundantly too, and memories renewed weighed more heavily on folk and their sorrowful longing grew ...

For it was true what Klab's wife had said to Agata the day before, that the whole village had become like an open grave. Indeed, it was as if a plague had descended upon Lipce, when the greater part of the folk are carted away to rest under the gravestones, or when war sweeps through and strikes down the menfolk, so that only the wailing of women is left in the empty cottages, the crying of children, sighs and mourning, and the vivid and agonizing memory of injustice.

There are no words for how those wearied souls were suffering!

The third week was drawing to a close and still the village of Lipce had not calmed down. On the contrary, indeed, for the sense of injury and injustice grew constantly, so it was no wonder that every day – at dawn as soon as they woke from sleep, every afternoon and every evening, in the cottages or outside, wherever folk gathered – complaints rang out, ceaseless lamentation, like the prayer of a beggar, and the hunger for vengeance teemed in hearts, like devilish evil weeds, so that fists clenched of their own accord and fierce cruel words broke free like thunderbolts.

Aye, Rocho's words, like a stick that carelessly agitates a dying fire so that the flames leap up strongly again, had served simply to drag the memory of all their injuries before their eyes once more. Hardly anyone even went to vespers, but gathered instead in the yards, congregated along the paths, or went to the inn, conferring, exclaiming and fulminating ...

Hanka alone felt better and so pleased at her husband's praise, so fortified in spirit and full of hope, eager for work and to show that she could manage everything, that there was no way to express it.

The women quickly dispersed, and Magda the blacksmith's wife soon arrived to sit with the sick man. Meanwhile, Hanka and Józka went off to the sty to look at the pig.

They let him out, but since he was fat and slovenly, he immediately rolled in the mud and refused to budge.

'Don't feed him again today – let him empty his bowels,' said Hanka.

'Indeed, I'd forgotten to give him anything this afternoon ...'

'Well, that's good this time. We need to see to him tomorrow. Did you tell Jagustynka?'

'She promised to come this evening, at supper ...'

'Put on your shawl and run for Ambrozy. Let him come tomorrow, right after Mass, and bring what's needed to sort the pig.'

'Will he be able to, when Father announced that two priests were coming tomorrow to hear confessions?'

'He'll find time! ... He knows I won't skimp on the vodka, and he's the only one who can slaughter it proper and dress the meat. Jagustynka will help.'

'I could go to town very first thing for salt and seasonings.'

'Hark at you! Feel like a change of air, do you! ... No need: Jankiel will have everything, I'll go myself in a minute and fetch 'em. And Józka!' she shouted after her. 'Where are Pietrek and Witek?'

'Probably went to the village; Pietrek had his fiddle.'

'If you see 'em, send 'em back. They're to bring the trough out front from the shed. It needs scalding in the morning.'

Glad to escape to the village, Józka raced off, first to Nastka's so that they could look for Ambrozy together.

But Hanka did not go to the inn. Her father, old Bylica, trudged over shortly afterwards, so she gave him a little to eat, happily recounting Rocho's news of Antek. She had not quite finished when Magda burst in with a shout:

'Come quick, something's up with Father!'

There was Boryna, sitting on the edge of the bed and looking about the room. Hanka rushed to prop him up so that he wouldn't fall. He ran his eyes over her, then fixed them on the door, through which the blacksmith had just entered unexpectedly.

'Hanka!'

He spoke loud and clear, so that she almost froze.

'Here I am. But don't move, the doctor forbids it,' she whispered, frightened.

'What's it like out?'

His voice was broken and strange.

'It's warm, spring's coming ...' she stammered.

'Is everyone up? ... Time for the fields ...'

They all looked at each other, not knowing what to say, while Magda burst into tears.

'Defend what's yours! Don't give up, men!' he shouted, but the words faltered. He began to shake and buckle upon Hanka's arm, so that the blacksmith and his wife made to help her. She would not let them, however, though her back and shoulders were straining. They gazed at him in alarm, waiting for what he might say next.

'The barley's to be sown first ... To me, men! ... Help!' he gave a sudden terrible shout, tensed and fell back, his eyes closed, a rattle in his throat.

'He's dying! ... Jesus! ... He's dying!' Hanka was screaming and tugging at him with all her might.

Magda pushed a blessed candle into his useless hand.

'Michał, quick, fetch the priest!'

But before the blacksmith had left, Boryna opened his eyes, dropping the candle, so that it shattered into pieces.

'It's passed. He's looking for something ...' The blacksmith whispered, bending over him, but the old man pushed him away quite forcefully and called completely lucidly:

'Hanka, send these people out.'

Magda threw herself upon him, weeping, but he seemed not to recognize her.

'No ... stop ... see 'em off ...' he repeated stubbornly.

'Step into the hallway at least, don't resist him ...' she begged.

'You go, Magda, I'm not moving from this spot,' the blacksmith hissed tenaciously, marking that the old man wanted to tell Hanka something in secret.

Boryna overheard and, raising himself, looked so fierce, pointing at the door, that he skulked out like a whipped dog, and darted with a curse to the porch, where Magda was crying. But he quickly fell silent and, looking about, plunged into the orchard, making his way stealthily round to the gable window, under which he crouched to listen, for since the bedheads were against that wall, some words could be made out through the panes.

'Sit by me ...' the old man commanded when the blacksmith had left.

Hanka sat down quick on the edge, barely able to withhold her tears.

'You'll find some cash in the storeroom ... Hide it so they don't prise it from you ...'

'Where?' She was trembling with emotion.

'In the grain ...'⁴

He spoke clearly, pausing to rest after every word, and she, suppressing her alarm, looked deep into his eyes, which were shining oddly.

'Defend Antek ... Sell half the farm if you have to, but don't give up ... don't ... yours ...'

Unable to finish, the old man turned blue and fell back on the bed, his eyes faded and misting over. He muttered something more and seemed to be trying to rise.

Hanka cried out in fright. The blacksmith and Magda rushed in and tried to revive him, giving him water, but he did not come to and lay as before, wooden, motionless, eyes wide open, far removed from what was happening around him.

They sat beside him a long time. The women wept quietly, and no one said a word. Dusk was falling. The room was sinking in shadows when they went out together into the fading day, where the last dying embers of twilight glowed, reflected in the pond.

'What did he say to you?' the blacksmith asked Hanka sharply, blocking her way.

'You heard him.'

'But later, what did he say?'

'Same as before, when you were there ...'

'Hanka, don't make me angry, or it won't end well ...'

'Your threats frighten me no more than that dog ...'

'He put something in your hand ...' he added craftily.

'Then you'll find it behind the barn⁵ tomorrow, won't you?' she taunted him, mockingly.

He lunged towards her and it might have ended badly had it not been for Jagustynka, who arrived at just that moment and said, as was her wont:

'You're conferring so agreeable and friendly the whole village can hear ...'

The blacksmith swore at her roundly and stormed off to the village.

A dark night soon fell, great clouds covering the sky so that not a single star shone through. A wind arose and slowly swept the trees, which rustled, dull and sad; another change was coming.

In Hanka's room it was bright and quite noisy: the fire crackled in the stove, supper was cooking and a few of the older women, Jagustynka at their head, were chatting of this and that. Józka, Nastka and Contrary Jasiek sat on the porch, for Pietrek was playing such a plaintive tune on his fiddle that they almost wanted to cry, but Hanka couldn't sit still. She kept thinking of Boryna's words, and glancing often towards the other side of the cottage ...

But what of it? She couldn't search the storeroom now: Jagna was in there, putting her Sunday best away in the chest.

'Pietrek, give over. It's nearly Holy Monday, and he never stops scratching and scraping. It's a sin!'⁶ she scolded, so shaken inside that she felt like crying. He stopped sure enough and they all came inside.

'We're talking about the squire's brother, stupid Jacek,' one of the girls explained.

She couldn't grasp what they were talking about, however, as the dogs began to bark loudly at the fences, so that she looked out again, rousing them further. Łapa dashed fiercely into the garden

...

'Attaboy, Łapa! ... Get 'im, Burek! ... Go on!'

But the dogs suddenly fell silent and returned, whimpering happily.

Several times that evening it was the same, so that a terrible suspicion began to grow in her.

'Pietrek, close everything up tight. Someone must be hanging about, and not a stranger, since the dogs don't want to seize 'im.'

Then they all went off and sleep soon settled on the whole house, all except for Hanka, who went to check again if the door was closed, and then stood a long time by the wall, listening fearfully

...

'In the grain, in one of the barrels ... If only no one gets there before me!'

She was in a cold sweat and her heart thumped violently.

She hardly slept that night.

CHAPTER 3

'Józka, light the fire in the range and get all the pans, fill them with water and put them on, and I'll dash off to the Jew for the spices.'

'Hurry up, Ambrozy's on his way.'

'Don't worry, he won't turn up first thing. He's got to see to the church.'

'Nay, he'll ring the bells and soon be here – Rocho's taking his place.'

'I'll make it; shout for the boys to scrub the manger quicker and get it to the porch. Jagustynka's coming, so she could wash the bucket, and the barrels need bringing out of the storeroom and rolling to the pond to soften up; but don't forget to put stones in so they don't float off. Don't wake the children – let the little mites sleep, there'll be more room ...' Hanka issued her orders sharply and, throwing her apron over her head, hurried off into the early and thoroughly quaggy morning.

The day had just dawned, cloudy, wet and unpleasantly chilly. Grey mists drifted like smoke over the softening earth, shedding a fine cold drizzle. The slippery roads were drenched grey with damp, and the blackened cottages were barely visible in the drab light. Soaked through, the trees shrank here and there like trembling shadows, as though they too were fashioned from translucent wisps of mist, leaning over to look into the faint blue pond, while from under the cloudy tangle all that could be heard was the quiet shivering tinkle of raindrops beating ceaselessly upon the water, and everywhere it blustered, so that hardly a thing could be seen, and hardly anyone had yet ventured out.

It was not until the Angelus bell began to sob that the red skirts of the women could be seen flashing here and there as they picked their way to church along the drier patches of ground.

Hanka hurried, reckoning to meet Ambrozy at the bend before the church. He'd not come out yet, though as usual at this time the priest's blind horse was loitering at the pond, pulling a barrel on skids. It kept pausing, hobbling over the bumps, aiming for the water by smell alone, for the farmhand had stopped to smoke a cigarette, squatting at the fences to shelter from the bluster.

And just at that moment, a britchka drawn by fat chestnuts pulled up before the presbytery and the stout red-faced priest from Łaznów descended.

'He'll be hearing confessions, and the priest from Slupia will be here any minute too,' Hanka thought, casting about in vain for Ambrozy. She then moved off down one side of the church, along an even muddier road. It was lined by rows of massive poplars, but so plunged in grey drizzle that they looked like shadows moving behind a steamed-up windowpane. She passed the inn and took a muddy path across the field on the right.

She'd reckoned there was time enough to visit her father and chat with her sister, with whom she was quite reconciled from the time of her move to Boryna's.

They were all sitting inside.

'Józka was saying yesterday that Father was poorly,' she began.

'Eh ... so as not to help. He's stretched out under his sheepskin and groaning and making excuses he's sick,' Weronka retorted darkly.

'The cold at yours! It's fair running up my calves.' She shuddered, for the cottage leaked like a sieve and a clammy layer of mud covered the floor.

'What've we got to burn! Who's going to get firewood? Have I the strength to dash that far to the forest and drag it here on my back when there's that much work I don't know where to turn first! Can I manage it all on my own!'

They both sighed over how wretched and abandoned they were.

'When Stacho was here, it seemed he were no use in the house, but now he's gone, you see at last what a man means. Are you not going to town?'

'Aye, I'd like to, quick as I can, but Rocho learned they won't let anyone in till Easter, so I'll go on Sunday and take the poor thing some o' the blessed food.'

'I'd take mine something, but what? A bit o' bread?'

'Don't take on. I'll prepare enough for the two of 'em and we'll take it together.'

'God bless your kindness. I'll pay you back some time in labour.'

'I'm giving it from the heart, not to be paid back. I've been fast friends with poverty and I know how hard that bitch bites. I remember, aye ...' Hanka whispered ruefully.

'It's a friendship for life, that one; seems the grave's the only escape. I had a few coins aside. I thought: I'll buy a piglet come spring, feed it up, and add a few zlotys with the digging. I had to give Stach a dozen zlotys, a grosz here, a grosz there, and it's drained away like water, and there's no more to put by. That's all we got for standing side by side with folk!'

'Don't say that, for he went with a good will with the others to defend what was his, and you will have a morgen of woodland from it ...'

'Will have! ... Time aplenty to go blind before the sun rises: if you've money, the piper plays, but you, poor wretch, trade in hunger and be glad to eat what comes your way!'

'Have you need of anything?' Hanka asked timidly.

'What have I got? Whatever the Jew or the miller gives me on the slate!' Weronka cried, spreading her hands in despair.

'I cannot help. I'd like to from the bottom of my heart, but I'm not in my own place and I must race about myself like a dog and guard that they don't throw me out of the house ... I'm at my wits' end sometimes! She remembered the previous night.

'Whereas nothing troubles Jagusia's head: she's no fool, having a fine old time ...'

'How d'you mean?'

Weronka rose, considering her sister with uneasy eyes.

'Nothing much, except she's making the most o' life; dressing up, strolling about with her friends, every day a holiday. Like yesterday, they saw her with the Voyt in the inn, sitting in the snug, and the Jew could barely keep up, fetching the pints ... She's not stupid enough to feel sorry for an old man ...' she threw in wryly.

'Everything comes to an end!' Hanka whispered grimly, pulling her apron on to her head.

'But pleasures she's enjoyed no one can take from her. She's a canny piece ...'

'Wit comes easy when there's nowt to heed! Well, we're slaughtering the hog today. Come by at supper – you can help ...' said Hanka, interrupting these bitter ruminations, and she left.

She looked in on her father on the other side of the cottage, in her old chamber. The old man was barely visible among the mess of bedclothes and groaned quietly.

'What's up, Father?' She squatted by him.

'Nothing. Daughter, nothing, just my ribs shaking and the pit of my belly squeezing something cruel ...'

'Because it's cold and damp as outside in here. Get up and come to ours. You can mind the children, because we're killing the hog. Are you not hungry?'

'Hungry! ... Aye, a little ... They forgot to give me owt yesterday ... Well, they've only potatoes and salt themselves ... and Stacho in prison ... I'll come, Hanka, I will ...' he stammered happily, scrambling from the pallet.

Meanwhile, Hanka, with thoughts of Jagna stabbing her like sharp knives, ran quickly to the inn for her shopping.

Aye, the Jew no longer demanded to be paid straight away, but eagerly weighed and measured whatever she wanted, even proffering new enticements.

'Jankiel should stick to what I ask for! ... I'm not a child, I know what I'm come for and what I need!' she reproved him haughtily, refusing to be drawn into conversation.

The Jew just smiled, for she'd spent a dozen zlotys already, since she'd already taken more vodka to last for Easter too, and fine white bread, bread rolls, fifteen herring and even a small bottle of arak, so that she could barely hoist her bundle.

'Jagna takes her pleasures, so why not me? Am I a dog? I slave like an ox!'

So ran her thoughts on the way home, but then she felt regret at the needless expense and, if not for the shame, she would have taken the arak back to the Jew.

In the cottage she found preparations in full swing. Ambrozy was warming himself by the fire, bantering as usual with Jagustynka, who was mightily busy scalding the pots till the whole room was full of steam.

'I was waiting for you, to bludgeon the hog on the head, set his ears ringing!'

'You got here that fast!'

'Rocho's taken my place in the sacristy. The priest's Walek will pump the bellows for the organist, and Magda'll sweep the church. I've fixed everything so as not to disappoint you! The priests won't be hearing confessions till after breakfast. But it's right cold today, sets your bones shivering!' he cried woefully.

'Practically drying his teeth in the fire and he's complaining about the cold!' Józka was amazed.

'Silly! I'm that cold through and through, even my wooden leg's stiff.'

'I'll soon get something to warm you. Józka, soak the herring double quick.'

'Hand 'em over as they are. Just don't begrudge the vodka – that'll draw the salt out grand.'

'You've always got to have it your way. If they clinked glasses at midnight, you'd get up, ready for a session,' Jagustynka remarked bitingly.

'Truly spoken, Grandma, but I'm thinking your tongue's dry and you'd happily dunk it in some vodka too, eh?' He laughed, rubbing his hands together.

'You'll not drink me under the table, you old stinker.'

'Don't seem to be many heading for church,' Hanka interrupted them, greatly displeased by this encouragement to drink.

'It's a holiday. They'll arrive soon enough at a gallop to shake off their sins.'

'And laze about, hear something new and gather a fresh set of sins ...'

'The girls have been getting ready since yesterday,' squealed Józia.

'Aye, because they're ashamed to confess in front of their own priest,' said the old woman.

'Time for you to sit and do penance in the porch, Grandma, and get spinning prayers 'stead of bad-mouthing others.'

'I'll wait till you're sitting alongside, pegleg!'

'I've time yet. I'll ring the bells beautiful for you first, and pat the grave down with my shovel ...'

'Don't you start – I'm cross!' she growled quietly.

'I'll have my stick at the ready and you'll not bite me. Have pity on those last few teeth ...'

Jagustynka shrugged with annoyance, but said nothing, for Hanka was just pouring a glass and drinking to them and Józka was handing around the herring. Ambrozy slapped one against his wooden leg, peeled off the skin, toasted it on the coals and ate it with relish.

'That's enough fun! To work, people!' he called, throwing off his sheepskin and rolling up his sleeves. Sharpening his knife on the grindstone, he took from the corner a hefty stake used for smashing potatoes for the pigs and briskly headed outside.

They all went after him to the yard, where he and Pietrek led the fiercely resisting hog out from the sty.

'Basin for the blood – hop to it!' he shouted.

They soon brought it and the hog rubbed himself against a quoin, squealing quietly ...

They stood silently in a circle, looking at his white flanks and fat swinging belly and getting thoroughly wet, for the rain was drizzling more than ever and the fog was rolling about the garden.

Only Łapa was making a noise, barking as he ran around. Some women stopped by the fences and a few children hung from the pickets, looking on curiously.

Holding the stake behind his back, Ambrozy crossed himself and began approaching the hog from the side. Suddenly he stopped, raising his arm behind him and leaning back so far that his shirt button burst open at the neck, tensed and didn't he then blast the pig's head between the ears. The hog fell to his forelegs with a squeal, and then didn't he whack him again, holding the stick with both hands, so that he fell on to his side, kicking his legs, then in a trice Ambrozy sat astride his stomach and the knife flashed as he plunged it to the hilt into the pig's heart.

They pushed up the basin. The blood spurted as from a hose, as far as the wall of the sty, and began to flow, bubbling and steaming as though it were boiling.

'Shoo, Łapa! Look at him, after the blood, though it's fasting time!' Ambrozy spoke at last, chasing off the dog and breathing heavily. He'd tired himself somewhat.

'Will you scald the hog on the porch?'

'I'll fetch the trough inside, for it'll have to be hung there for butchering.'

'It's cramped inside, I think.'

'You've got the other side, your father's – plenty of space there, won't bother the old man ... But quick, before it cools – the hide'll come away faster!' he ordered, tearing off the longest bristles from the pig's back in the meantime.

In a few prayers, the hog was scalded, stripped of its bristles, scrubbed and hung in Boryna's room, stretched on a crossbar tied to a beam.

Jagna was not there; she had gone to church first thing that morning, with no idea what was to happen. Only the old man lay there, on the bed as usual, staring with his unseeing eyes.

At first they busied themselves quietly, glancing frequently at the sick man, but since he did not move a muscle, they soon forgot him, engrossed in the hog, which did not disappoint expectations, for the bacon along his back was six fingers thick with plenty of fat.

'We've sung to 'im, sent 'im on his way, time to wet his head with vodka!' Ambrozy cried, washing his hands over the trough.

'Come have breakfast – we'll soon find something to knock back.'

And indeed he tossed back a fair-sized shot before he got stuck into his borscht and potatoes. He didn't hang about long, quickly getting back to work and chivvying everyone, especially Jagustynka, as the two worked side by side, since she knew just as much as he did about salting and preparing meat.

Hanka helped as best she could, whereas Józka was happy to find any excuse to stay indoors beside the pig.

'Go help shovel the dung,' Hanka yelled at her. 'They should get a move on carting it. I can see they won't be finished today, the idlers!'

Józka rushed outside begrudgingly, venting all her crossness on the boys, so that you could hear her constant yammering. Why, she'd been chased out just as it was getting livelier inside, for every minute some housewife would drop in, inviting herself for no good reason, neighbourly like, and seeing the hanging hog would spread her hands and start exclaiming at how huge it was, how fat, so that even the miller's didn't compare, nor the organist's.

Very gratified at this, Hanka preened herself mightily that she was slaughtering a pig, and though she did regret the vodka a little, it was too bad; she had to follow the custom among farmers on such a holiday. She offered it, along with bread and salt to bite on, and listened happily to all these flattering words, and chatted away. Barely had one woman crossed the threshold than another pair of clogs would be heard stamping off the mud in the hallway – someone else dropping in just for the space of a Hail Mary on the way to church, seemingly. They were piling in as at the indulgences and there were children aplenty, scurrying about and looking in at the windows, so that Józka had to see them off more than once.

A mood of expectation was growing in the village. More and more people were knocking about the lanes, or carts from other villages rumbled by. A constant procession of women in red dresses stretched along the pond, for folk were on their way to confession, ignoring the bad roads or the bleary day – unpleasant and so changeable. First the rain began to fall, then a warm wind tumbled through the gardens, or soft hailstones, fat as pearl barley, and then the sun broke through the clouds for a moment and sprinkled the world with gold – as often is the way in early spring, when the weather becomes fussy as the kind of girl who is assailed by smiles and tears and merriment and grief all at once, so that she herself cannot divine what the matter is with her.

But at Hanka's, no one was marking the weather and the place fair rang with work and chatter. Ambrozy was deft and urged on the others, quipping as was his custom, but as he frequently needed to look in on the church to check all was in order, he would complain of the cold and repeatedly call for something to warm him up:

'I've seated the fathers, and lined up folk enough to keep 'em sat till noon.'

'Ha, the Łaznów parish priest won't last. They say his housekeeper has to keep handing him the chamber pot!' said Jagustynka.

'Granny, keep your nose out of it, leave the priests be!' He didn't like that kind of talk.

'And what about that one from Slupia? They say he always keeps a flask of scent to hand to stick his nose in on account of how folk stink, and that after every confession he flaps the foul air away with his handkerchief and perfumes it ...'

'Shut your mouth: hands off the priests!' he burst out, angered.

'Is Rocho in church?' Hanka took up hurriedly, also very displeased at Jagustynka's tittle-tattle.

'There from early morning, serving Mass and organizing what's needed.'

'What about Michał, then?'

'Gone to Rzepki with the organist, for the census.'

'Ploughs with a goose, sows with sand, and still everything comes up grand,' said Ambrozy with a sigh.

'Oh indeed, he gets at least an egg for each name he lists ...'

'And the confession cards – why, he takes three groszy a soul. Every day I see what bags he lugs back, all sorts. Last week the organist's wife sold at least twelve hundred eggs alone,' remarked Jagustynka.

'He arrived on foot with a single bundle, and now it'd take four manor wagons to cart him away.'

'Organist's been in Lipce for twenty years at least and it's a big parish. He works, strives, he's thrifty, so he's made a fortune,' Ambrozy reasoned.

'Made a fortune! He fleeces folk wherever he can, and looks in their pockets before he does a good turn; takes thirty zlotys for a burial just to bleat some Latin and tinkle on the organ.'

'Well, he knows his business and sometimes has to puzzle right well!'

'Oh, he's got learning all right, knows when to squeal high, when to bray low and how to swindle folk.'

'Another would have drunk it away, but he's sending his son to be a priest.'

'To his own glory and the profit on it!' the old woman retorted bitingly.

They stopped at an interesting point, for Jaguś burst in at that moment, stopping suddenly on the threshold as though turned to stone.

'Amazed at the pig?' said Jagustynka with a laugh.

'Could you not butcher it on your side! You'll soil the whole room,' Jaguś blurted, standing there, her face crimson.

'You can clean up, you've got the time!' Hanka replied coldly and pointedly.

Jaguś pitched forwards as though to quarrel, but then gave up, spun about the room, took the rosary from the crucifix and, throwing a shawl over the mussed bed, went out without a word, though her lips were trembling with suppressed rage.

'You could help, there's that much work!' Józka said to her in the hallway.

Jagna turned on her with such anger you could not make out a word and ran off in a fury. Witek looked out and said she'd gone straight to the blacksmith's.

'Let her, she can have a moan and feel better!'

'You'll be at war again!' Jagustynka remarked quietly.

'M'dear, warfare's all I live by!' Hanka retorted calmly, though she was alarmed, for she realized that the blacksmith would surely be here any moment and a fierce quarrel was unavoidable.

'Any minute now!' Jagustynka whispered in sympathy.

'Don't you fear – I'll survive, they won't scare me,' she replied with a smile.

Jagustynka shook her head in amazement at her, glancing knowingly at Ambrozy, who was just finishing up.

'I'll look in at the church, ring the noon bell and be right back for dinner!' he said.

He returned promptly, saying the priests were already at table, that the miller had sent a whole trap of fish and that after dinner they'd be hearing confessions, since a mob of folk was waiting. After a quick and short but well-watered dinner, for Ambrozy had declared pathetically that the vodka was too weak for such over-salted herring, they got back to work.

He was just quartering the pig and carving off the meat for sausage, and Jagustynka, having spread a side of meat upon a table made from a door, was slicing and carefully salting pork fat, when in flew the blacksmith.

It was clear from his face that he was almost beside himself.

'I had no idea you'd bought yourself such a hog,' he began ironically.

'Well I have and I'm butchering it, as you see!' Hanka was a little frightened.

'Fine hog, must have given thirty roubles for it ...' He examined it closely.

'You'd be hard pressed to find fatback this thick!' The old woman laughed, shoving the meat under his nose.

'Wasn't quite thirty I gave, not quite!' Hanka replied with a laugh.

'This is Boryna's hog!' he burst out suddenly, unable to suppress his anger.

'Why he's canny, he can tell whose it is just by the tail!' the old woman mocked.

'What right have you to slaughter it!' he shouted, outraged.

'Stop shouting, you're not in the inn. I've the right since Antek ordered it slaughtered through Rocho.'

'What's Antek got to say round here? It's his, is it?'

'Course it is!' She was emboldened now and ready for battle.

'It belongs to everyone! ... You'll pay dear for this!'

'I don't have to answer to you!'

'Then who? The court'll hear of it.'

'Oh shut up and be quiet. There's a sick man lying here, and it all belongs to him ...'

'But you'll be eating it.'

'For sure, I won't be giving you a sniff of it.'

'Give me half the pig and I'll not make hell for it,' he whispered more gently.

'You'll not force a single leg out o' me.'

'Then give us a quarter for kindness' sake and a side of bacon.'

'If Antek tells me to, I will, but you won't get a bone without his say-so.'

'The woman's gone mad! ... Is it Antek's hog or what?' Anger roused him again.

'Father's, so as good as Antek's, for since Father's ill, then Antek's in charge and everything's on his head. And after, it'll be as the Lord wills ...'

'Let him be in charge in the clink, if they let him ... If it's farming he likes, they can drag him to Siberia in chains and he can do some farming there!' ¹ he shouted, foaming in his rage.

'You leave him be! ... Maybe they will take him ... but you'll still not get a nibble o' these fields, so that you can become an even greater Judas to the people!' she said threateningly, shaken by a sudden fear for her husband.

The blacksmith's legs almost buckled beneath him and his hands began to shake and flutter over his clothes, such a desire had he to grab her by the throat, drag her round the room and give her a kicking. But he got a hold of himself, for there were others about – he only glared at her, infuriated, unable to choke out a word. But she wasn't cowed; she merely caught up the carving knife and stared at him with a shrewd and mocking look until he sat down on the chest, rolled a cigarette and with bloodshot eyes glanced about the room, weighing something up and calculating, for he stood up promptly and said kindly:

'Come to the other side. I'll tell you something we can agree upon.'

Wiping her hands, she followed, leaving the door open.

'I don't want to quarrel with you or to bring in the law,' he began, lighting his cigarette.

'You'd gain nothing by it!' She'd calmed down again.

'Did Father say anything else yesterday?' He was pleasant now, and smiling at her.

'Nay, he lay quiet, like he is today ...' She felt wary, a suspicion growing in her.

'The hog's small beer, butcher away and eat it, your decision ... not my loss. Sometimes a body comes out with something they later regret. Forget what I said! There are weightier matters ... You know they say in the village that Father has a fair bit of ready cash hidden in the house somewhere ...' He paused, his eyes boring into her face. 'It would be worth taking a look. God forbid he should die and the money be lost or some stranger get their hands on it.'

'But will he tell where he's hidden it!' Her eyes were impenetrable.

'He'd spill it to you, if you tease it out clever.'

'Let his reason come back, I'll try asking ...'

'You'd be wise to hold your tongue on the matter. If the money's found, only the two of us need know. If it were a larger sum, it would be easier to buy Antek out of prison too ... and why does anyone else need to know? ... Jagna's got plenty signed over ... and there'd be enough to pay for getting those morgen from her legally ... And hasn't Grzela had plenty sent to the army!' he whispered, leaning over her.

'True ... aye ...' she stammered, careful not to let anything slip.

'I reckon he must have hidden it in the cottage somewhere ... What do you think?'

'How would I know when he's not said a word?'

'Didn't he mention the grain to you yesterday ... d'you not recall?' he hinted.

'Aye, he were reminding us of the sowing.'

'And the barrels, he mentioned,' he prompted her, not dropping his eyes from her face.

'Indeed! The grain in the barrels for sowing!' she cried, as though not understanding.

He cursed quietly, but even more convinced that she knew something. He read it in her closed face and eyes, a little too furtive and fearful.

'Whatever he confided, don't go telling it ...'

'Am I some gossip who goes rushing to her friends with titbits?'

'Why, it's just a caution ... But take good care, because if a spark has struck once in the old man's mind, in the space of a prayer he could light up completely ...'

'Well ... the sooner the better!'

He glanced at her once or twice with his crafty eyes, plucked at his moustache and went out, while she watched him go, full of suppressed contempt.

'You Judas scum, you thug!' she burst out in hatred, taking a few steps after him. It wasn't the first time he'd come at her dangling threats and fears that they'd send Antek to Siberia and chain him to handcart.

Of course, she didn't believe him quite, knowing he was ranting out of anger mainly, to frighten her and oust her more easily from the cottage.

But that aside, considerable anxiety for Antek ate away at her. She tried to glean as well as she could what sort of punishment might await him, marking with sadness that he would not get off scot-free.

'It's true he were defending his father born, but he killed the woodsman, so they have to punish him, aye ...'

So said the most sage, leaving her unable to get to the truth of the matter, for everyone had their own opinion. The lawyer in town, to whom the priest had sent her with a letter of introduction, said that it could go either way, very bad, or tolerable; it was a matter of not begrudging the money and waiting patiently. But it was the village talk, meanwhile, where the blacksmith's insinuations held sway, that alarmed her most.

No wonder, then, that his words now fell like stones on her soul. Her legs were unsteady beneath her as she worked. She could not speak, fear choked her, and then there was Magda, to boot, who ran in after her husband had left and sat by the sick man, seemingly to chase the flies off him, though there were none, and following everything with watchful eyes.

But that task quickly grew tedious, it seemed, since she offered to help.

'Don't trouble yourself. We'll manage – you've toiled plenty at home!'

Hanka's tone of voice was such that Magda left off, piping up but rarely and shyly, since she'd been silent and timid from birth.

And then right at suppertime Jagna appeared again, but along with her mother.

They greeted everyone as though they all lived in the greatest accord, so friendly and flattering that Hanka was touched, yet though she responded in kind, not sparing a kind word or even the vodka, still she remained watchful. But Dominikowa pushed away the glass.

'Holy Week! As if I'd touch a drop!'

'It's not in the inn and, given the occasion, not a sin!' Hanka justified herself.

'Folk indulge so willingly and are happy always to justify with the occasion ...'

'Drink to me, mistress, I'm not the organist!' cried Ambrozy.

'Let a glass but clink, and you're lost to temptation,' muttered Dominikowa, busying herself dressing the old man's head.

'Well, I ... Some beat their breasts, repentant at the sound of a bell, while others grope for a glass when they hear the clink of a bottle ...'

'Here he lies, poor wretch, here he lies, lost to God's world!' she exclaimed dolefully over Boryna.

'And he won't be eating the sausage, and he won't be tasting the vodka!' Jagustynka continued derisively, in the same vein.

'You do nothing but mock!' Dominikowa rebuked her crossly.

'So? Will crying take away my troubles? Laughing's all that's left to me.'

'Let him who sows iniquity garner sorrows and do his penance!'

'It's not in vain they say Ambrozy, though he serves at church, is ready to befriend sin to indulge himself at any cost!' Dominikowa pronounced haughtily, casting a stern eye at him. 'Only they who reject the good and befriend the wicked have no heed of what they will reap later,' she added more quietly, like a threat.

Silence fell upon the room. Ambrozy fidgeted crossly, but suppressed a sharper retort, for he knew that the priest would hear of his every word by tomorrow after Mass at the latest; not in vain was Dominikowa forever in church ... And the rest, too, wilted under her owl's stare. Even the intractable Jagustynka uneasily stopped talking.

Why, the whole village feared Dominikowa. Many a one had felt the power of her evil eye, many a one had fallen sick or lay with twisted limbs after she'd cast a spell on them.

They worked without saying a word, heads bent anxiously, as her white face, withered and lined as bleached wax, seemed to hover above them in the room. Nor did Dominikowa comment when, together with Jagna, she set about helping so briskly that Hanka did not dare forbid it.

Since the priest's farmhand had called Ambrozy back to church, they had been left alone, diligently arranging the meat and sides of bacon in the barrel and pails.

'It'll be cooler for the meat on this side, in the storeroom, the fire's lit less ...' the old woman directed, rolling the vessels through with Jagusia.

It all happened so quickly that, before Hanka could object, before she'd grasped what was happening, everything was in the storeroom. Greatly angered, she hastened to carry what was left to her side, calling Józka and Pietrek to help.

It was dusk and they were lighting the lamps when they began hurriedly to make sausages, black pudding and brawn. Hanka chopped the meat with a grim fury, she was still so agitated.

'I'm not leaving it in that storeroom for her to make off with or guzzle! Just you wait! What a sly piece!' she muttered at last between clenched teeth.

'Early, when she's off at church, bring everything quietly over to your storeroom and that'll be that! She'll not come back for it, will she!' Jagustynka advised, funnelling meat into the long guts so that they wound about the table like fat red snakes. She hung them, a few at a time, on rods above the fire.

'Let her try! Plotted together and rushed over they did!' Hanka could not calm down.

'Sausages'll be ready before Ambrozy's back,' the old woman remarked.

Hanka was silent, absorbed in her work, but mainly in brooding how to retrieve the sides of bacon and ham.

The fire crackled in the stove and the whole chamber glowed red in the fine blaze. All manner of things were bubbling in the pans, to be made into black pudding, and the children crowded cautiously around the basins of blood.

'Lawks, I feel faint with all these smells!' Witek said with a sigh and inhaled deeply.

'Stop your sniffing or you'll get a smack! Go put down the cows' hay and fodder for the night ... It's late already! When were you planning to do it?' cried Hanka.

'Pietrek'll be here in a minute, can't manage on my own ...'

'Why, where's he gone?'

'Didn't you know? ... He's helping tidy up on the other side!'

'What? Pietrek! Get to the cattle!' Hanka shouted into the hallway so loudly that Pietrek dashed out in a flash. 'Get off your backside and fix your own place! ... Hark at her! ... Princess, saving her hands, using the lads!' she cried, completely enraged. She was tipping out the rest of the steaming kidney and lungs on to the table from the pans when the rumble of a cart was heard outside and a bell ringing.

'It's the priest taking the Lord Jesus to someone!' explained old Bylica, who was just coming into the room.

'Someone's ill? There's not been word of that!'

'They've gone towards the Voyt's!' Witek shouted, breathless, through the window.

'Must be one of the hired hands ...'

'Or maybe to yours, the Pryczeks', they're that way too ...'

'Ha! Fit as fiddles they are, nothing bad happens to scum like that,' whispered Jagustynka, but though she lived in conflict with her children, in constant legal wrangles, she shuddered.

'I'll ask about and be back in a flash ...' She rushed out hurriedly.

But a good part of the evening had passed. Ambrozy came back and still she hadn't returned; the old man was saying that they'd called the priest to Agata, the Kłabs' kinswoman, who had trudged back from her begging Saturday last.

'What? Is she not at the Kłabs?'

'She's taken refuge with the Koziołs or maybe the Pryczeks for her dying.'

It was all they exchanged on the matter, greatly busied with the work, and behind with it too, since Józka and even Hanka herself had to keep dashing into the yard to do the evening chores.

The evening dragged on slowly, tedious and endless. Such darkness came tumbling down that you could not see your own fist. A cold rain lashed, the wind whipped the walls again and again and trampled the gardens, making the little trees knock about noisily in the dark, and blew down the chimney, sending burning embers scattering into the room.

It was almost midnight when they finished, and still Jagustynka had not returned.

'Mud and bluster – probably she didn't want to grope her way back!' thought Hanka, glancing outside before going to bed.

Aye, it was a pity to drive even a dog out in such weather. There was a flurry fit to set the roofs rattling, great clouds, dun and swollen, drunk with rain, rolled about the turbid sky and not a single star up high, nor any glimmer of firelight in the cottages, now vanished completely into the night. The village was long asleep; only the wind romped about the fields and tussled with the trees, sweeping over the surface of the pond with a whistle.

They soon went to bed, not waiting any longer.

Jagustynka, meanwhile, did not appear until the following morning, but gloomy as a cold and windy, mud-caked day. She just warmed her hands inside and then went to the barn to pick over the potatoes, ready in a heap from the pit.

She worked almost alone, for Józka kept running off to spread the muck that Pietrek had been carting since dawn, already thoroughly scolded by Hanka for idling the day before and failing to finish. He chivvied in turn, snapping at Witek, lashing the horses and driving fit to send the mud flying.

'That layabout bastard, taking it out on the critters now!' declared the old woman, shooing the geese away, for the whole flock had descended on to the threshing floor and didn't they start pecking potatoes and honking something terrible. Józka looked in on her, but she did not reply, sitting like a curmudgeon and studiously hiding her reddened eyes with her apron, which she'd pulled forwards over her head.

At first, Hanka checked on them only the once, as she was lying in wait for Jagna to go out in order to move the meat to her storeroom and at the same time to probe the barrel of grain, but as though out of spite, Jagna took not a step from the cottage. Hanka, unable to restrain herself, went to see the sick man and, making some excuse, slipped into the storeroom.

'What are you looking for? Why, I know where everything is, I can show you!' called Jagna, following her, so she had to go out, having barely thrust her hands into the grain. The money could be deeper, at the very bottom ...

She quickly realized that the other was watching her so, unwillingly, she gave up, putting aside her plans for a more convenient moment.

'Time to start preparing the gifts,' she thought ruefully, looking at the sausages hanging on the rod. It was the custom at the Borynas' and the other wealthiest farmers' that, when someone butchered a hog, the very next day they would send gifts to their nearest kin or friends – a sausage or some other chunk of meat.

'Aye, it don't come easy but give you must, or they'll say you're close-fisted ...' said Bylica out of the blue, striking at the heart of the sorry problem.

And so, despite the reluctance plucking at her heart, she began to prepare the plates and bowls with a heavy sigh, more than once exchanging too short a piece for a longer one, adding black pudding to some, and then taking it away, until in the end, weary and aching, she called Józka.

'Get dressed up and you can go take these round ...'

'Jesus, so much of everything!'

'What's to be done! Jack may garner alone but it takes two if he's to dance!² Those longer ones for your aunt first – looks at me askance, and gives me lip, but it can't be helped. That in the boy's for the Voyt. He's a scoundrel, but he and Maciej were friends and he might be of help yet. A whole black pudding, sausage and bacon for Magda and the blacksmith – let 'em not be yapping that we ate Father's hog ourselves. Aye, it won't shut 'em up, but they'll have less cause to pick on us ... This sausage is for Pryczkova – she's proud and haughty with a mouth on her, but she was first to come ... The last one's for Kłab's wife ...'

'Nothing sending for Dominikowa?'

'Later, in the afternoon ... aye, we must ... That kind's like dung, don't touch and keep your distance too. Take 'em in order, and don't get chatting with the lasses, there's work waiting.'

'Give some to Nastka. They're so poor at hers, they can't even afford salt ...' Józka asked quietly.

'Let her come by, I'll give her something. Father, take some for Weronka – she were supposed to look in yesterday ...'

'She were called to the miller's early evening to tidy up. Guests must be coming for Easter.'

And he stammered all manner of other news, but Hanka, having despatched Józka, couldn't wait. She dressed a little warmer and ran to help Jagustynka and chide the boys.

'I waited for you with supper,' she began, surprised at the old woman's silence.

'Eh ... I were full just wi' looking, and I've got an ache today in the pit o' my stomach ...'

'Agata's ill it seems?'

'Aye, the poor wretch is passing at the Koziols.'

'What, not at the Kłąbs?'

'They recognize those as kin who need nothing, or arrive with full hands; the rest, though flesh and blood, they set the dogs on ...'

'What are you saying! They didn't throw her out, after all!'

'Ha, she arrived Saturday and got ill in the night straight off ... They say Kłębowa took her quilt and sent her off as good as naked ...'

'Kłęb's wife! Never! Such an honest woman, must be nothing but gossip.'

'I'm saying nothing but what's reached my ears ...'

'And she's ailing at Kozłowa's! Who'd have thought that one'd be so kind.'

'The priest himself is kind when there's money in it. Kozłowa took twenty zlotys from Agata and for that they're to keep her till her death, for the old woman reckons she'll go any day now. But the burial's separate, and if the old woman don't manage today, she will tomorrow. Not long to wait now ... no ...' She stopped suddenly, trying in vain to curb her sobs.

'What is it, are you sickening?' asked Hanka with sympathy.

'I've had my fill of human misery. It's shaken me to my roots. A body's not made o' stone. You try defending yourself with malice before the whole world, if need be, but you can't in the end. There comes a time when you cannot bear any more and your soul crumbles to dust with the misery of it.'

She was overcome with weeping and sobbed a long time, blowing her nose loudly, until once again she began to speak, painfully, so that her words dripped on to Hanka's soul like bitter, burning tears.

'There's no end to this human ruination. I sat beside Agata when the priest were leaving and in runs Filipka from over the pond, crying that her eldest daughter were dying ... I came running, aye ... Jesus, that cottage were cold as ice ... The windows are stuffed with straw ... one bed in the house, and the rest huddling like dogs in a heap o' bedding ... The girl weren't dead, but it were the hunger ... no potatoes left, quilt sold already ... Every quart o' groats they must beg from the miller – no one wants to give credit or lend till harvest ... Who is there can? There's no rescue. Filip's in the clink with the others ... I'd just come out from theirs, when here's Grzegorzowa saying that Florka Pryczkowa was brought to bed and needing help ... Scoundrels they are and done me wrong, though my own born children ... I went in, it were no time to be dwelling on wrongs ... And there's misery's baring its fangs, kids everywhere. Florka's sick, she's not a single grosz put by and no help from anywhere ... she cannot chew on her land after all ... There's no one to cook, the fields standing fallow though spring's on its way ... for Adam's in the clink like the others ... She gave birth to a boy, fit as a flint, if he can but survive, for Florka's thin as a rail and not a drop o' milk in her breasts, and the cow's only just come into calf ... And everywhere's so bad – for the labourers it's beyond the telling ... No one to work, no one to earn, not a grosz, no rescue from anywhere ... Jesus could at least grant 'em an easy death, so the poorest folk don't suffer.'

'But who's got it good in the village? Misery and heartache everywhere.'

'Oh aye. The farmers have troubles aplenty ... One is agitating what's best to stuff his guts with, and another, who he can lend to at the highest percentage, but none of 'em trouble about the poor, even were they to die at their fences ... My God, they all sit in the same village, across a baulk, and it ruins no one's sleep ... Aye, everyone leaves the poor to Jesus' care and blames divine order for everything, but they're happy themselves to cosset a stomach beside a full bowl and shield their ears with a warm sheepskin, so as not to hear the whining of the poor ...'

'What's to be done? Who's got enough to relieve all this poverty?'

'Where there's no will there's no way to be found! It's not you I'm drinking a toast to. You're not in your own house and I know well that it's hard for you, but there are those who could help, there are: the miller, the priest, the organist, and others ...'

'Maybe if someone let it be known, they'd have pity ...' Hanka reasoned.

'A watchful soul would hear the calling of the suffering themselves, without being berated from the pulpit! They know full well what's happening with the poor folk, m'dear, for they feed on that human poverty and grow fat on it ... It's harvest-time already for the miller, though reaping's still far off in the field. People are queuing for flour and groats, for their last grosz, on credit, for labour in kind, or at a good percentage, for you must still buy food though it means selling your quilt to the Jew ...'

'True, you'll get nothing for free ...' She remembered her own recent misery and sighed deeply.

'I sat by Florka till late. A few women had gathered and were telling what's happening in the village, they were ...'

'Name o' the Father and Son!' Hanka yelled suddenly, leaping to her feet, for the wind had slammed the doors so hard it was a wonder they hadn't shattered. She opened them with difficulty, propping them open carefully with stakes.

'It's blowing hard, but warm somehow. So long as it don't bring rain.'

'The cart's already sinking to its axles in the field.'

'A few good days of sun and it'll soon dry. It's spring after all.'

'If we could just start sowing before Easter!'

They commented now and then, absorbed in their work, until eventually they fell silent. Only the patter of falling potatoes could be heard as they picked over and threw the stunted ones on to one heap and the rotting ones on to another.

'There'll be something to fatten the sow and enough for the cows' drink too ...'

But Hanka seemed not to hear, pondering all the while how best to get at her father-in-law's money. She glanced outside but briefly, at the tousled trees skirmishing with the gale. Great ragged, livid clouds tumbled about the sky like sheaves of scattered hay, and still the wind grew stronger and seemed to blast from low down, making the thatched roof of the cottage bristle like a brush. A damp coldness arose at the same time, along with the stink of the dung that they were collecting from the heap. The farmyard, meanwhile, was almost empty, but for a darting chicken or two, chased by the wind. Taking refuge by the fence, the geese were sitting on the goslings, cheeping quietly. Pietrek would come charging in every so often with an empty cart. He'd circle about, parking directly opposite the threshing floor, slap his arms against his sides, toss the horses some hay and, having loaded up dung with Witek, he'd drive off again, bracing the cart over the potholes and heading for the field.

Sometimes Józka, red and breathless, shot in with a shout, flustered with distributing the sausages and chattering away.

'I've taken the Voyt's, now I'm off to Auntie's ... They were all in, whitewashing the walls for Easter. They were pleased, so pleased ...'

She told every detail, though no one was asking, and then flew off to the village again, carefully carrying the bowls with the gifts, all wrapped in a white shawl.

'Chatterbox of a lass, but smart,' noted Jagustynka.

'Aye, smart all right, when it comes to pranks and having fun ...'

'What do you expect? ... She's no more than a stripling yet, a child ...'

'Witek, go see who's gone into the house!' Hanka called suddenly.

'Blacksmith's just gone in!'

With a sudden sense of foreboding, she ran straight to Father's side. The sick man lay prone as usual. Jagna was sewing by the window. There was no one else there.

'Where's Michał got to?'

'Must be somewhere, looking for the key to the cart that he lent to Maciej sometimes,' she explained, not lifting her eyes.

Hanka looked in the hallway; he was not there. She looked in on her side; only Bylica sat with the children by the fire, whittling windmills for them. She even looked in the yard; not a sign of him. So she burst straight into the storeroom, though the door was closed. Indeed, there was the blacksmith, arms in the grain barrel up to his elbows, and scrabbling about assiduously.

'Key's hidden in the barley, is it? Eh?' she flung at him breathlessly, gasping with outrage and facing him menacingly.

'I'm just checking it's not mouldy, if it's good for sowing,' he stuttered, unexpectedly startled.

'That's no business of yours! ... What are you doing in here?' she shouted.

He pulled out his hands unwillingly and, barely restraining his fury, he muttered:

'You watch me like I'm a thief ...'

'You think I don't know why you're in here, eh? Ha, sneaking into people's storerooms and poking around in the barrels. Maybe you'd like to bust the padlocks and open the chests ... eh?' she shouted more and more loudly.

'Didn't I tell you yesterday what we need to look for ...' He was striving to stay calm.

'You were trying to gull me, to throw dust in my eyes, and then do as you please. I've seen through your sneaky plans, I have ...'

'You shut your mouth, Hanka, or I will!' he bellowed menacingly.

'Just try, you ruffian! You lay a finger on me and I'll scream so that half the village'll be here in a flash and see what sort of fox you are!' she threatened.

He took a good look around the walls and finally retreated, cursing vigorously.

They glared at each other and with such vehemence that, had they been able, they would have stabbed each other to death with those flashing looks.

Hanka had to have a drink of water, and couldn't gather herself together for a long time after this uproar.

'It must be found and safely stowed away, for if he finds it, he'll steal it,' she thought, returning to the barn, but halfway there she turned back.

'You sit in the house, keeping watch, but you let strangers into the storeroom!' she shouted at Jagna as soon as she opened the door.

'Michał's no stranger – he's as much right as you!' She did not bat an eye at the other's yelling.

'You lying dog, you're in cahoots with him. Fine, but just watch, if anything goes missing from the house, as God's in heaven, I'll go to court and name you as accomplice ... Just remember that!' she shrieked, infuriated.

Jagna leapt up from her seat, seizing whatever was to hand.

'Want a fight! Come on, then! Just try! I'll fix that charmin' little face o' yours till it's streaming red and your born mother won't recognize you!'

On she thundered, viciously shrieking whatever rage brought to her tongue.

There's no knowing how it might have ended, for they were flexing their claws already and coming closer and closer as they screamed at each other, if Rocho hadn't arrived at just that moment. Shamefaced under his gaze, Hanka recovered herself and left without another word, slamming the door behind her with all the force of her rage.

Jagna remained in the chamber, unable to move with fright. Her lips trembled as though in a fever and her heart pounded. Her tears fell like peas. Finally she came to and, tossing the mangle she'd been gripping into a corner, she threw herself on the bed, distraught, in painful, desolate crying.

Hanka, meanwhile, told Rocho what it was all about.

He listened patiently to this shrill tale intermingled with sobs, and unable to make head nor tail of it, he interrupted her sharply and began sternly to rebuke her, even pushing away the food he was offered. Greatly angered, he reached for his cap.

'It's time for me to leave and never set eyes on Lipce again, if this is how you are. It's all to the cheer of the Evil One, or the Jews, who laugh to see the quarrelsome foolishness of Christian folk! Merciful Jesus mine, is there not misery enough, sickness enough, hunger enough, that you have to fly at each other, at loggerheads, and add wrath to the list?'

He was breathing hard after this speech, while Hanka was so overcome with alarm and grief that he might leave in anger that she kissed his hand and begged forgiveness with all her heart.

'If you knew how hard it is to put up with her. She does everything out o' spite, and to injure me. Why, just her being here wrongs us ... aye, so much land she's got written over to her ... And don't you know what she's like? What she gets up to with the lads ... what ...' (no, she couldn't bring herself to mention Antek). 'And now she's carrying on with the Voyt, they say ...' she added more quietly. 'So, aye, as soon as I see her, I so boil with anger, I could stab her ...'

'Leave vengeance to God! She's a human being too and feels pain, and will answer heavily for her sins. I say to you, do not hurt her!'

'It's me hurting her, is it?'

She was greatly taken aback, not able to reckon how Jagna was being hurt. Chewing his bread, Rocho followed her with his eyes, pondering something. Eventually, he stroked the children's heads, pressing them to his knees, and got ready to leave.

'I'll look in on you some evening, but now I say only this: let her be, mind your own affairs, and leave the rest to the Lord Jesus ...'

He praised God and headed for the village.

CHAPTER 4

Rochro trudged along the road by the pond slowly, first because the wind was tugging at him so that he could barely stand upright, and second because he was greatly troubled by all that was happening in the village. He raised his burning eyes again and again to the cottages, pondering gravely and sighing sorrowfully. Things were so bad in Lipce, they couldn't possibly be worse.

That many were starving, that disease was rife, that they quarrelled more and came to blows, or even that death came plucking out her own more keenly than in previous years, that was not the worst of it. Last year had been no different, nor other years past; folk were accustomed to it and well understood that it couldn't be otherwise ... What was bad and far worse was something else entirely – that the ground stood fallow, for there was no one to till it ...

Spring had arrived, together with the birds heading for last year's nests. The higher fields were drying, the waters were subsiding and the earth fair begging for the plough, for manure and for that holy grain ...

Who was there to go into the fields when every pair of working hands was in gaol! ... Why, there were only women left in the village, and they hadn't the strength to manage everything nor the head for it. More than one was due to give birth, as was often the case in spring, and here cows were calving, fowl hatching, sows farrowing. In the gardens, too, it was time to sow and plant the sets, the potatoes needed sorting from the pit before planting, there was water to be drained from the fields, muck to lift and cart – you could work yourself ragged and not manage without a man ... And the livestock on top of that to tend and water, and feed to be chopped, logs to split and wood to cart from the forest, and so much other daily labour – the children, to name but one, of which there were plenty everywhere like poppies, Jesus! They could scarce feel their own bones, by evening their backs were numb with graft, and not even half the jobs were done, when the most important of all was left – the work in the fields!

And the earth was waiting, basking in sunshine, dried by breezes, drenched with warm and fertile rains, grown firm in the mild and misty nights of spring – a green brush of grass was sprouting already, and a vigorous growth of winter wheat. The skylark's song rang out above the fields, the storks waded across the waterside meadows, and flowers blazed along the marshes, reaching towards the bright sheet of shimmering sky that seemed higher every day, so that folks' yearning eyes could see ever further, as far as the edges of the villages and forest, invisible before in winter mists. The whole world was waking from a sleeping numbness, stretching and decking itself out for springtime gaiety and merrymaking ...

Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, folk were working so diligently that all day long, come rain or shine, cheerful songs and cuckoo calls could be heard, ploughs flashed in the fields, people milled about, horses neighed and carts rattled by gaily. Only the Lipce fields stood empty, quiet and completely lifeless, like a desolate graveyard ...

And to cap it all, the crushing distress for those imprisoned ...

There was a hardly a day when someone did not trail to town with a bundle and abject pleas that the innocent be freed.

For indeed, what mercy will there be for wronged folk if they do not seize justice for themselves!

Things were bad, so bad, that even strangers from other villages began to mark that the injury done Lipce was an injury directed towards all peasant folk. Why, an ape might swipe at an ape, but folk should back each other up lest they meet a similar end.

It was no wonder, then, that other villages – though previously they'd been at daggers drawn with Lipce over borders, all manner of neighbourly disputes, or out of pure envy that the Lipce folk swaggered over the rest, regarding their village as the best – now set aside their differences and shook off all desire for vengeance. Often some peasant from Rudki or Wólka, or Dębica, or even from the Rzepki gentry, would make their way secretly to Lipce for news.

Meanwhile, on Sunday after the High Mass, or at times like the day before at confessions, they asked many an urgent question about the prisoners, pulling grim faces, cursing freely and shaking their fists at the perpetrators and sorrowing greatly together with the Lipce folk over the fate of the wronged.

All this was now on Rochro's mind, as well as some other important purpose, for his step slowed even further and he paused often, sheltering from the wind behind the thicker trees and gazing into the distance as though oblivious to everything around ...

It seemed to be clearer and warmer, except for an odious wind that began to pick up by the hour, so that it filled the whole world with its roar. The thinner trees bent over with a moan, beating their branches against the pond. It tore thatch from cottage roofs and snapped the more brittle branches, blowing with such force now that everything was on the move – orchards, fences, houses and individual trees, until it seemed that all were flying with the wind. Even the pale sun, clambering from out behind the sprawling clouds, was racing across the sky in a swirl of sand, while above the church a flock of birds with outstretched wings, unable to withstand the driving wind, let themselves be borne along by the gale, to be flung with terrified cries against the spire and lurching trees.

But the wind, though unpleasant and rowdy, was also thoroughly drying the fields, for it was grand how light the ridges had become since morning, and the water had drained from the lanes ...

Rochro stood a long time in his meditations, blind to all God's world, when he suddenly stirred and moved off, as some disputatious voices had reached him along a gust of wind.

He looked about swiftly. On the other side of the pond, in the farmyard before the Soltys's cottage, the red splash of a group of women could be seen, with other people in their midst ...

He hurried over curiously, to find out what had happened.

But spying gendarmes from a distance, together with the Voyt, he turned aside into the nearest farmyard, and from there began to pick his way cautiously through the orchards to the group. He preferred not to catch the eye of the authorities.

The hubbub, meanwhile, grew more and more shrill. More women kept arriving, with children swarming from every direction, squeezing in among their elders and jostling each other, until the farmyard was so crowded they tumbled into the road, ignoring the mud, the swaying trees and their whipping branches. They were clamouring about something all together. An individual voice sometimes rose above the rest, but he could not make out what was going on, for the wind snatched their words away. All he could see between the trees was that Ploszka's wife was at the helm: fat, stout, her face flushed red, she was shrieking the loudest and shaking her fists so fiercely under the Voyt's nose that the latter stepped back. The rest echoed her shouts like a flock of enraged turkeys. Kobus's wife, meanwhile, buzzed at the edges of the crowd, trying in vain to push through to the gendarmes, surrounded as they were by clenched and shaking fists, and even a stick or two or a mucky flax break ...

The Voyt was explaining something, scratching his head worriedly, and holding back the women himself while the gendarmes cautiously withdrew from the crowd towards the pond and then headed for the mill. The Voyt set off after them, barking a comment behind him occasionally and threatening the boys who'd started to throw mud.

'What did they want?' asked Rochro, stepping among the women.

'What indeed! Twenty carts and people for the corvée, this instant, to fix the road in the forest ...' Ploszkowa explained.

'Some notable's meant to pass that way and so they're ordering the potholes to be fixed ...'

'We said we're not giving horses nor carts.'

'Who is there to go?'

'Let them first free our men, then they can go fix the road.'

'They can harness the squire!'

'Let 'em get on and do it themselves, not go entering folk's houses.'

'Scum, villains!' cried one after another, ever louder.

'Soon as I saw gendarmes, I felt something bad were coming ...'

'They've been in cahoots with the Voyt at the inn since morning.'

'Guzzled down the vodka, then started doing the rounds, herding people to work ...'

'The Voyt knows full well how things are in Lipce and should've said so at the magistracy,' Rochro spoke up, trying in vain to shout over the chorus of enraged voices.

'Ha, when he's well in their pockets!'

'And first to get stuck in.'

'And cares only for profit.'

So they stormed, one after another.

'He were persuading us that a hen from every house and fifteen eggs and they'd go to other villages for the corvée.'

'Stones, I'll give 'em!'

'Smack of a stick from me!'

'Quiet, you women, or they'll charge you with contempt!'

'Let 'em, let 'em throw us in the pokey! I don't care if it's the highest authority, I'll tell 'em everything straight to their faces, what wrong's been done us!'

'Like I'm scared of the Voyt! ... That poxy piece! ... He's as much to me as a scarecrow! ... He don't remember that it's the peasants what chose him, and they can throw him out too!' shrieked Ploszkowa.

'Charge us, eh! ... Don't we pay our taxes, don't we give our men as recruits, don't we do whatever they order! ... They've taken our men, it's still not enough for 'em!'

'As soon as they appear, some misery falls on someone's head.'

'They even shot my dog in the fields back at harvest!'

'And me they took to court for my chimney catching fire!'

'And what about me, for drying last year's flax behind the barn?'

'And didn't they beat up a Gulbas lad for letting fly a stone at 'em!'

They all shouted at once, thronging round Rocho until he stopped his ears at the noise.

'Quieten down, for heaven's sake! Talking won't help! Hush!' he cried.

'You go to the Voyt, then, and tell him, or we'll be over there with our brooms!' Kobusowa yelled, unrelenting.

'I'm going, but please disperse! ... Why, each of you has that much work at home ... I'll spell it out to him!' he entreated them, fearing the return of the gendarmes.

And since at that moment the church bell began to ring for noon, they started slowly to disperse, still chattering loudly and pausing in front of the cottages.

Rocho, in the meantime, quickly entered the Soltys's house, where he now lived, teaching the local children in an empty room at the Sikoras' at the other end of the village, beyond the inn. The Soltys was not at home, having gone to take the taxes to the *powiat* offices.

Speaking calmly and methodically, Sochowa soon relayed what had happened. 'Let's hope that nothing bad should come of all that clamouring!' she remarked, finally.

'It's the Voyt's fault. The gendarmes do as they're told, but he knows that there are almost only women left in the village, that there's no one to work the fields, never mind be off to the corvée. I'll go to see him – he must smooth things, so that they're not ordered to pay fines!'

'It all looks like revenge on Lipce for the forest!' she said.

'On whose part? The squire's? ... Dear Lord! What's he got to do with the authorities?'

'Gentlefolk will always agree easier with gentlefolk, living in accord as they do, and didn't he threaten revenge on Lipce!'

'Lord! There's not a single peaceful day to be had! ... Always something new!'

'As long as there's nothing worse to come!' she said with a sigh, clasping her hands as if for prayer.

'They swooped down like magpies and started mouthing to high heaven!'

'Well, if a body's got an itch, it's got to scratch!'

'Shouting won't help – you just bring more disaster down on your head!' He was agitated and alarmed that nothing ill should once again befall the village.

'Are you off back to the children?' she asked.

He had risen from the bench.

'I have dissolved my school as it's Easter and because they must help at home, with so much work everywhere to be done!'

'I was at Wola this morning seeking labourers. I promised three zlotys for tillage, and to feed 'em too – not one did I manage to find. Everyone's doing their own fields first; what time have they got to care about others! They promised to come in a week or two!'

'Jesus! That a person has only these two hands, and feeble ones at that!' He sighed heavily.

'You help folk already, you do! ... If it were not for your head, your good sense, there's no knowing what would have become of us all!'

'If I could do all I'd like to do, there'd be no misery on earth! Oh no!'

Spreading his arms in a gesture of utter helplessness, he hurried off to the Voyt's. But he did not get there quickly, calling in as he did at many a cottage on the way.

The village had calmed down a little. The most obstinate were vociferating still in farmyards here and there, but most had dispersed to prepare the noonday meal, and along the roads only the wind was left carousing as before, tossing the trees.

But soon after noon, despite the tiresome gale, people began swarming everywhere – in the homesteads, in the gardens, before the cottages, in hallways and chambers. Everywhere hummed like a hive with work and the ceaseless trilling of the women – for it was women and lasses alone who were at large. If a boy turned up, it was one still wet behind the ears, good for little more than grazing the livestock, since all the older ones were stuck inside with their fathers.

They set to briskly, urging each other to hurry since, what with the priests' arrival yesterday for confession, they'd had themselves a holiday, sitting almost the whole day in church, and today the gendarmes had frittered their time away too.

And here was Easter fast approaching. Holy Tuesday had crept up on them. The work had mounted up, and labours aplenty – for every cottage must be tidied, children made trim, and themselves neatened too. There was wheat to be ground at the miller's, the blessed baskets¹ to be readied, and all manner of other things, so that the mistress of every cottage was hard pressed how to manage all of it, and carefully examined her storeroom to see what could be sold at the inn, or what taken to town to acquire some needful groszys. A few women had even left right after dinner with something under the straw in their carts to sell.

'Be careful a falling tree doesn't crush you!' Rocho warned Gulbasowa, who was just driving past with a wretched nag that could barely stand up in the wind.

Then he turned straight away towards her cottage, noticing that the girls, who were stuffing chinks in the walls, could not reach above the windows. He paused to help them, and what's more mixed the lime for whitewashing the walls and fashioned a grand brush from straw.

And on he went.

At the Wachniks' they were carting dung to the nearby fields, but so maladroitly that half the load ended on the road, shaken from the cart's planks along the way. The two girls were forced to tug the horse by the halter since it wouldn't heed them. Rocho stepped in; he smacked the dung down hard on the cart as should be done, and chastised the horse with the whip until it pulled, obedient as a child ...

At the Balcereks', meanwhile, Marysia, the one considered prettiest in the village after Jagna Borynowa, was sowing peas right by the fence in the well-manured black earth. Except that, her head wrapped in a scarf and dressed in her father's full-length capote, so that her skirt would not blow about, she was struggling like a fly stuck in tar.

'Don't rush so, you'll master it yet!' he said with a laugh, stepping on to the patch.

'Oh yes ... If on Holy Tuesday peas you sow, for every mug a sack shall grow!' she shouted in reply.

'The first ones'll be up before you've finished sowing the last! But too close, Marysia, too close together ... If they sprout they'll get tangled and collapse!'

He showed her how to sow with the wind, for the silly girl hadn't realized, and had sowed just as the seed fell.

'And there was Wawrzon Socha telling me you were handy with everything!' he said, unwittingly stepping into a muddy puddle.

'Have you talked with him?' she cried, stopping suddenly to catch her breath.

She reddened terribly, but was afraid to question him further.

Rocho only smiled, but on departing remarked:

'I'll tell him at Easter how diligently you've set to work!'

Whereas at the Płoszkas', two lads, cousins of Stach, were ploughing the potato field, one urging on the horse, the other ploughing, seemingly. They were striplings both, their noses barely reaching the horse's tail and with little strength, so aye, the plough was going like a drunken fellow, and the horse turned towards the stable every minute. They whipped her by turn constantly and swore, squabbling among themselves.

'We'll manage, Rocho, we will, only on account of these buggers of stones the plough jumps and the mare's forever straining to get to her foal ...' the elder boy explained, wailing, until Rocho took the plough and sliced the first ridge, instructing them all the while how to drive the mare.

'Now we'll plough a whole furlong come night-time!' the boy cried pluckily, glancing round fearfully in case anyone had noticed Rocho's assistance. When the old man had gone, however, he soon sat himself on the plough as his father did, his back to the wind, and smoked a cigarette.

And on went Rocho round the cottages, marking where he might be of use. He soothed quarrels, appeased feuds, gave advice and helped even with the heaviest work where it was needed. At the Kłąbs' he chopped the wood, seeing that Kłębowa could not manage the gnarled stumps, he brought water from the pond for Dominikowa, and, elsewhere, he urged spoilt children to obedience ...

And should he notice that somewhere they were too sad and complaining – he made them laugh with funny jokes ...

With the lasses he was happy to counsel on girlish matters and speak of the boys. With the women he chatted about the children, their troubles, the neighbours and all the things in which only womankind finds solace – if only to incline them to better thoughts ...

And since he was a clever man, devout and had seen much of the world, he knew immediately at a glance what to say to whom, which anecdote would pluck the sadness from a soul, who had need of laughter, who of prayer, or a hard wise word, or a warning ...

So good was he and so mindful of community that even unbidden he would spend many nights beside a sick person, bolstering the poor wretches with his kindness so that they respected him more than the priest ...

So eventually he began to seem to folk like a saint from God, bringing God's mercy and comfort to the homesteads.

Ha! Could he manage all this misery? Could he conquer fate, feed the hungry, heal the sick or make his own hands suffice for those that were missing?

He laboured beyond the power of one man to help and champion folk – yet for a whole village he was but a crumb, as though someone were moistening parched lips with a drop of dew, without giving them ought to drink!

Was it any surprise! The village was huge after all, there were more than fifty cottages alone and a vast swathe of land to till, livestock to tend and more mouths to feed than you could shake a stick at.

Since the men had been taken, all this was held together more by divine Providence than by human effort, so was it any wonder that troubles multiplied with every passing day, more penury, whimpering and perturbation ...

Rochro had long known and been aware of this, but it was only now, going from cottage to cottage, that he realized the decline that was stealing in on every side ...

Not enough that fields were lying fallow everywhere, that no one was ploughing, nor sowing, nor planting, for their efforts in the fields were mere child's play – but ruin and neglect were visible at every turn: fences were tumbling in places and laths and rafters poking out through torn thatch, gates hung broken, beating against walls like broken wings, and more than one cottage leaned to one side, begging in vain to be shored up.

Pools of stagnant water stood everywhere, knee-deep mud and mess by cottage walls. It was difficult to pass, and such desolation at every step it made your heart bleed. The cows were often to be heard bellowing with hunger and the horses were simply surrounded by dung, for there was no one to muck them out.

And so it was with everything. Even calves wandered untethered along the roadsides, smeared in mud like pigs. Household implements rotted in the rain, ploughs rusted away, sows farrowed in wagon baskets and whatever was warped or snapped or broken fell down and lay where it landed, for who was there to fix it? ... The women?

But those starvelings barely had strength or time for what was most urgent! Aye, let the men but come back and things would change in a flash ...

They waited on their return as on God's mercy. Day by day they waited, sustained with that one hope ...

But the men did not return and there was no way of learning when they'd be released. So in the meantime, the Evil One alone gleaned joy and profit from this desolation, from folk's quarrels and strife, from this torment of hearts in misery and want ...

Dusk was already sowing the world in arcs of grey when Rochro left the last cottage beyond the church, the Goląbs', and trudged to the Voyt's, at the other end of the village ...

The wind was still pounding and flinging itself about more than ever, tossing the little trees so violently the roads were unsafe, with broken branches flying everywhere.

Hunching over too, the old man skulked along the fences, barely visible in that strange grey light of dusk like glass ground to dust.

'If you're going to the Voyt's, he's at the mill supposedly, not at home!' Jagustynka appeared in front of him unexpectedly.

He turned towards the mill without a word. He could not bear that tattletale.

But she soon caught up and, tottering beside him, she whispered almost into his ear:

'Look in on my Pryczeks and on Filipka ... Look in, do!'

'If I can help, I'll look in ...'

'They did so beg that you should – do look in!' she pleaded fervently.

'All right, but first I must speak with the Voyt.'

'God bless!' She kissed his hand with trembling lips.

'What's up with you?' He was astounded, for they were always at war with one another.

'Nothing, but that the time comes to everyone when they feel rejected as a homeless dog, happy when a kind hand pats them ...' she whispered tearfully, but before he found a gentle word for her, she had hurried away.

He did not find the Voyt at the mill, however. It appeared he had left for town with the gendarmes – so said the miller, inviting him to rest in his chamber, where a fair few women from Lipce and men from another village were sitting, waiting their turn for grinding. Rochro would willingly have sat there longer, but Tereska the soldier's wife, sitting with the others, soon placed herself beside him and began timidly to ask for news of Mateusz Goląb in a low voice.

'You went to see the men, so you must have seen him too ... Is he well? In good spirits? When will they let him go?' she pressed him, avoiding his eyes.

'And how is your husband in the army? Is he well? Coming back soon?' he asked finally, in the same low tones, fixing her with his stern eyes.

She reddened and ran off to the mill.

He shook his head over her besottedness and followed, wishing to explain something and caution her against sin, but in the mill, despite the lamplight, he could not find her in the gloom and the agitation of flour and dust: she had hidden from him. Meanwhile, the mill rattled, the waters tumbling under the wheels with a ceaseless roar, and the wind smashed against the walls and roofs as though hurling massive sacks, making everything tremble and shake as though it would be torn apart at any moment, so that Rochro soon gave up searching and went to visit those other unfortunates.

Night had quite fallen in the meantime. Lights trembled here and there, like wolves' eyes, through the swaying trees, but outside it was strangely bright, so that he could see the cottages sunk in orchards, and could even make out the fields. The sky hung high and dark, deep blue and almost clear, with only a faint snowy dusting here and there, as the sprinkling of stars began to thicken. The wind did not quieten, however, but quite the opposite; it picked up strength and pitched about everywhere.

It blew nigh on the whole night long, so that hardly anyone closed their eyes for even a prayer, since it rushed through the houses. The trees whipped the walls and pressed at the windows, butting and beating like rams, until they feared the wind might rip up and scatter the whole village.

It was almost morning before it calmed down, but scarcely had the cockerels crowed for dawn and the exhausted folk fallen asleep when thunder began to rumble and tumble above. Bloody ropes of lightning flashed and then a torrential rain began to fall. Some said that thunderbolts had even struck the forest.

By the time day was up it had calmed down completely, the rain had stopped and warmth was fair bursting from the fields. The birds began to twitter joyfully, and though the sun did not appear, in places a fine blue sky could be seen through occasional rents in the low whitish clouds. They said good weather was on the way.

But in the village there was wailing and lamentation when damage beyond reckoning was revealed in the aftermath of the gale: fallen trees lay side by side on the roads, along with bits of broken roof and fencing, so that you couldn't drive past.

At the Płoszkas' it had knocked down the pigsties and all the geese were crushed. Every cottage in turn had damage to show, so that all the yards were swarming with women, and there was keening and tears copious as rain.

Hanka, too, went out to look at the farm and check the damage, when Sikorzyna dashed into the farmstead.

'Haven't you heard? Stach's cottage has been brought down! ... It's a miracle they weren't all killed!' she yelled from afar.

'Jesus, Mary!' Hanka froze in alarm.

'I came to fetch you, for they've lost their minds over there. All they do is cry ...'

Hanka threw her apron over her head and set off at a gallop, while other folk, hearing of the misfortune, came hurrying after in droves.

Indeed, it was true: only the walls were left of Stach's cottage, now even more warped and sunk into the ground. There was no roof at all, just a few broken rafters swinging overhead. The chimney too had collapsed, so that only a small stump was left, like a jutting rotten tooth. Round about, the ground was strewn with tangled sheaves and smashed clutter.

Weronka was sitting by the wall on a toppling heap of things, her arms about her weeping children, howling loudly.

Hanka fell upon her sister and the others gathered round to comfort her, but she heard and saw nothing, heaving with ever greater sobs.

'Oh, my poor waifs, my unhappy waifs!' she moaned painfully, so that many a one shed a tear in pity.

'What will become of us poor wretches? Where will we lay our heads? Where will we go?!' she cried, beside herself, hugging the children.

Shrunken and white as a corpse, old Bylica wandered through the rubble, rounding up the hens or throwing a handful of hay to the cow tethered to the cherry tree, or he would crouch by the wall, whistling to the dog and gazing at people like a fool ...

They thought he had completely lost his mind.

Suddenly they all parted and moved aside, bowing humbly to the ground, for the priest had arrived unexpectedly.

'Ambrozy has just told me of this misfortune. Where is Stach's wife?'

They shifted to one side to reveal her, but she could see nothing through her tears.

'Weronka, the priest himself has come!' whispered Hanka.

She jumped up then and, catching sight of the priest before her, threw herself at his feet, bursting out into even louder and more plaintive wailing.

'Calm down, don't cry! ... What's to be done? ... It's God's will ... Yes, I say: God's will!' he repeated, but so moved that he himself stealthily wiped away a tear.

'We'll have to go a-begging, begging out in the world!'

'Now, don't shout. Good folk won't let you perish and the Lord God will grant you his succour too. You weren't hurt, though? What?'

'God was merciful!'

'It was a miracle indeed.'

'It could have crushed you all, like Płoszka's geese.'

'You might none of you have escaped alive!'

So they said, one after another.

'And have you lost any livestock? What? The livestock, I say!'

'God protected us somehow. Everything was in the hallway and escaped without a scratch.'

The priest took a pinch of snuff and with tear-filled eyes surveyed the rubble, which was all that was left of the cottage, for the roof had completely collapsed and plummeted inwards, along with the ceiling, and all that could be seen through the smashed windowpanes were heaps of broken wood and rotting straw from the thatch.

'You're lucky, it could have crushed you all ... well, well!'

'Well, I wish it had, I wish it had killed us all. I would not have to look on this ruin, I would not have lived to see this misery and desolation ... Oh Jesus, my Jesus! I'm left with nothing but these waifs ... And what will happen now? What'll I do?' she howled again, tearing at her hair in despair.

The priest spread his hands helplessly, stepping from foot to foot.

'Drier on this!' whispered someone, timidly pushing a plank towards him, for he was up to his ankles in mud. He stepped on to it pondering, as he took a pinch of snuff, what word of comfort to give.

Hanka busied herself zealously with her sister and father while the rest crowded about the priest, fixing their eyes upon him.

More and more women and children arrived from the village, the only sounds that of the mud splattering incessantly under their clogs, the murmur of muffled fearful voices of the growing throng, or the crying of Weronka and her children. The sobs were fading, but on faces, barely visible under aprons pulled over foreheads, lurked sorrow and concern, clouded as the overhanging sky, and hot tears slid down many a cheek ...

Yet in themselves, all were peaceful, submissive before this divine scourge. What else could they do? If everyone were to take another's troubles to heart, they would not have strength enough for their own, and besides: could they undo what had been done? Could they have prevented it?

All at once, the priest stepped up to Weronka and said:

'But first you should thank God for rescuing you ...'

'Aye, and I'll make a Mass offering, even if I've to sell a pig ...'

'No need, keep your money for more urgent needs. I'll say a Mass for your intentions right after Easter in any case.'

Kissing his hands fervently, she clutched his legs in sincere gratitude for his goodness and compassion. He, meanwhile, crossed himself and blessed her, patting her head and kindly embraced the squealing children at his knees, caressing them like the best of fathers ...

'Do not lose faith, and everything will turn to the good. But how did it happen?'

'How? We went off to bed as soon as evening fell, for there were no fuel for the lamp and no firewood. It were blowing mightily, the cottage shook, but I weren't afraid, for we'd seen bigger gales. I didn't sleep straight off, such draughts were running through the house, but I must have dozed later. When suddenly such a boom, such a shaking, such a smashing against the walls! Jesus! ... I thought the whole world were toppling down. I jumped out o' bed and I'd barely got my arms about the children and by now everything were cracking, splitting, crashing down on our heads ... I just managed to get into the hallway and the house fell down behind me ... I hadn't even got my thoughts together when the chimney collapsed with a bang ... Outside it were blowing so it were hard to stand and the wind were tossing the thatch everywhere. And it's dead of night, a fair step to the village, everyone sleeping and no way to be heard! ... I pulled the kids down into the potato pit and we sat there till dawn.'

'God's Providence was watching over you. Whose cow is that by the cherry tree?'

'Why that's mine, she's all that feeds us!'

'Looks like a good milker, back like a beam, high in the withers ... In calf?'

'Any day now.'

'Bring her to my byre, there's room, she can stay there till pasture time ... But where will you go? ... I ask you: where?'

Suddenly the dog began to bark and hurl itself at people fiercely, and when they chased it off, it sat on the threshold and howled dismally.

'Is it mad or what? Whose is it?' the priest asked, hiding a little behind the women.

'Why that's our Kruczek ... Aye, he's upset ... he's a feeling dog ...' Bylica stammered, going to quieten him.

Praising God in farewell, the priest beckoned to Sikora's wife to follow him, and stretching out both hands towards the women, who were pressing forward to kiss them, he slowly departed.

They watched him holding forth a long time with her along the road.

The womenfolk, having chatted a little and sympathized with the poor unfortunate, began to disperse quite quickly, suddenly remembering their breakfasts and urgent tasks.

Only the family was left by the rubble, wondering how best to rescue anything from the ruins, when Sikora's wife returned, out of breath.

'Come to mine, to the other side of the house, where Rocho taught the children ... There's no chimney, but you can put in an iron stove and that'll do you ...' she said quickly.

'But, my dear, how will I pay you rent?'

'Don't trouble your head over that. If you find a grosz you'll pay, and if not, you can help with the work, or you can stay on a blessing, you can. The room's standing empty, after all! I ask you from the bottom of my heart, and look – the priest sends you this here money for your needs!'

She unfolded three paper roubles before her eyes.

'God grant him health!' cried Weronka, kissing the notes.

'You'll not find a more honest man!' Hanka added.

'The cow will not do badly either in the priest's byre! Aye ...' the old man said. And the move began immediately.

The Sikora cottage stood by the path on the turn to the village, and straight away they set about fetching their remaining belongings and what could be retrieved most quickly of the dishes and bedding from under the rubble. Hanka sent for her own farmhand to help and finally Rocho arrived. By the time the bell rang for noon, Weronka was in her new dwelling.

'A hired hand I am now, almost a beggar! Four walls and a stove the fifth, not even a picture, or a single whole bowl!' she complained bitterly, glancing about her.

'I'll bring you a holy picture and any dishes I find spare. Stacho will come back and soon have the cottage up again with people's help. You won't stay this way long ...' Hanka soothed her kindly. 'And how's Father?'

She wanted to take him with her.

The old man had stayed behind at the ruin; he was sitting on the threshold, seeing to the dog's injured side.

'Come on with me, there's no room at Weronka's. We'll find you a corner at mine.'

'I'll not go, Hanka ... I'm staying ... Here I was born, and here I shall die.'

No matter how she begged, or how she reasoned, no, he would not budge.

'I'll shake down in the hallway ... aye ... but if you say so ... I'll come to yours to eat ... I'll watch the children in return ... aye ... but take the dog, his side is hurt ... aye ... he'll watch the place ... he's a good guard dog.'

'The walls will tumble down and crush you!' she begged.

'They'll last longer than many a body yet ... Take the dog ...'

She insisted no longer, since he did not wish it. In truth, there wasn't much room at hers, and the old man would be more bother.

She told Pietrek to take Kruczek on a rope and lead him to the house.

'He'll stand in for Burek, who's run off somewhere. What a dunderhead!' she shouted impatiently, when Pietrek couldn't manage the dog.

'Stupid dog ... bite, will you ... you'll get grub there every day ... aye, and lie about in the warm ... Kruczek!' the old man scolded, helping to put him on a leash.

Hanka rushed ahead, to look in on her sister along the way. She was surprised to find several women in the room and Weronka in tears again.

'What have I done to deserve all this kindness? What?' she was wailing.

'We can't give much, there's hardship wherever you turn, but take what we've brought, for we give with sincere hearts,' Kłab's wife was saying, pushing a sizeable bundle into her hands.

'Such misfortune has come to you!'

'Folk aren't made of stone, after all, everyone's known misery.'

'And you're without a man, like the rest.'

'So it's harder for you at such a time than for others.'

'And the Lord has sent you a heavier trial.'

They spoke one after another, placing bundles before her, for they had consulted and brought what each one could: some peas, or barley groats, or flour ...

'Dear people, women, mothers born!' She sobbed uncontrollably, clinging to them so earnestly it set all of them weeping.

'There are still good people in the world, there are!' thought Hanka with emotion.

And here came the organist's wife rolling through the door, heaving a loaf of bread under her arm and a piece of pork fat wrapped in paper.

Not waiting for her speech, Hanka hurried home, as the noon bell was ringing.

It was bright outside. The sun had not appeared, but even so a strangely sunlit brightness seeped into the day. The sky hung high, like a blue sheet thinly overlaid with the white scarves of fringed clouds, while below stretched an endless spill of fields, as clear as though in the palm of the hand, turning green in places, and yellow in others from stubble and fallow soil, glittering with streams of water like panes of glass.

The skylarks sang out loudly and from the fields, the woods and the bluish distances, bracing spring air flowed the whole world through, full of warm dampness and the honeyed fragrance of poplar buds.

The village roads swarmed with people dragging branches and trees broken by the wind into the farmyards.

The air, meanwhile, was so quiet that the trees, veiled in the first green down of growing buds, barely stirred.

An innumerable flock of sparrows was churning about the church, making the maples and sprawling branches of the lindens look black as soot, while their deafening twittering could be heard throughout the village.

Meanwhile, ganders were screaming as they guarded their goslings beside the smooth shining pond where the brisk pattering of sticks could be heard as womenfolk washed their laundry.

And everywhere the hullabaloo of hurried tasks, shouts between cottages, swarms of children and the red flash of women's skirts among the orchards.

Hallways and chambers stood wide open, freshly washed clothes hung along the fences, bedding aired in the orchards, here and there walls were being whitewashed, dogs were waging war with the pigs beavering in the ditches, and cows raised their horned heads from behind fences, lowing dolefully.

Many a cart had left for town to do the holiday shopping. And right after noon the old pedlar Judka arrived in his long wagon with his Jewish woman and brat.

They drove from house to house, eagerly pursued by dogs, and rarely did Judka emerge with empty hands. He was not a cheat like the innkeeper or others, but paid quite well, and even if someone had need of a loan before harvest, he would supply one at low interest. A clever Jew, he knew everyone in the village, and how to speak to whom, so that again and again he would pull

some bullock to the wagon or tip out a quart of grain, while the Jewish woman traded on her own account, fetching eggs, cockerels, some plucked chickens or six ells of linen, wheedled out of folk mainly in exchange for frills, ribbons, threads and hairpins, and that entire stallful of adornments for which all womankind is always hungry, and which she carried in a massive box, enticing the greediest ...

They were just passing the Boryna house when Józka burst in with a squeal:

'Hanus, buy some red ribbons! ... And we need that brazilwood for dyeing the eggs ... and we're short of thread!' she whined and begged.

'You can go to town tomorrow and buy what's needed.'

'Yes, in town it's even cheaper and no monkey business!' she confirmed, happy at the prospect, so she ran out to the traders without being told, calling that they needed nothing and had nothing to sell.

'And round up the chickens in case one gets harnessed to the Jews' cart!' Hanka shouted after her, looking out of the house.

Tereska the soldier's wife was just turning into the farmyard, as though fleeing the Jewish woman, who was shouting something after her.

She fell into the chamber, unable to utter a word but just stammering and blushing cruelly, and so dejected that the tears hung on her long lashes.

'What's the matter, Tereska!' asked Hanka, greatly curious.

'Those swindlers are giving me only fifteen zlotys and the woollen skirt's completely new! I'm in such need of money, it's a wonder I don't take to stealing ...'

'Show me ... is it dear?' She had a weakness for clothes.

'At least thirty zlotys! Brand new, a whole seven ells and half a span of cloth, more than four pounds of pure wool went into it, I had to pay the dyer too.'

She spread it out in the room so that it shimmered and sparkled like a rainbow, the rippling colours making your eyes squint.

'What a beauty! It's a great shame, but what can I do? ... I need money for Easter myself. Can you not wait till after Easter?'

'When I need it this minute!'

Rolling up the skirt quickly, she turned her face away as though ashamed.

'Perhaps the Voyt's wife'll buy it ... They're not so hard up there.'

Hanka took it one more time for a look, holding it against her side, and with a sigh of regret handed it back.

'You want to send your man something to the army?'

'Aye ... he wrote ... moaning he hasn't enough ... God bless!'

She almost ran out of the house. Jagustynka, grating potatoes into a pail for the sow, began to laugh uproariously.

'It's a wonder she didn't leave her skirt behind in her hurry, the way you pinned her down! She needs the money for Mateusz, not her husband.'

'So they know each other that well!' She was greatly surprised.

'Well, I never! Where've you been – lost in the forest?'

'How was I supposed to know?'

'When Tereska's rushing to Mateusz every week and stalks the prison for days at a time and takes him whatever she can.'

'For heaven's sake! ... Has she not a husband of her own?'

'Indeed, but that one's in the army, far away and no knowing when he'll be back, and it's dull for a woman alone. Mateusz was close by, right at hand, beast of a man too. Why should she begrudge herself?'

Hanka thought of Antek and Jagna. She fell into a deep reverie.

'And when they took Mateusz, she got friendly with his sister, Nastka, even sits around at theirs and they rush off to town together. Nastka to see her brother, seemingly, but mainly to remind Dominikowa's Szymek of her existence ...'

'The way you know about everything! Well, well!'

'They do everything openly, the fools, so it's easy to see. She's selling her last woollen skirt, to make an Easter for Mateusz!' she mocked spitefully.

'Well, well, what people do get up to ... I must be off to see Antek too.'

'That's a bit of a way in your condition, you'll get sick ... Cannot Józka go, or someone?' she could barely restrain herself from naming Jagna ...

'I'll go myself – God willing, nothing will happen. Rocho says that they'll let people in at Easter, so I'll go ... But those sides of bacon need turning.'

'They're salting for the third day – aye, it wouldn't hurt. I'll go in a minute.'

She went, but came back even quicker, announcing in confusion that half the meat was missing.

Hanka dashed to the storeroom. Józka came flying after and they stood in alarm over the pail, deliberating how it could have happened.

'This is no dog's work: you can clearly see the mark of a knife ... nor would a stranger, a thief, come in for a few pounds ... This is Jagna's doing!' Hanka decreed. She burst vehemently into the chamber, but Jagna was not there, just the old man lying as always, with vacant, staring eyes.

Józka suddenly remembered that Jagna had been hiding something under her apron that morning when she was going out, but thought it was some headress that she was making for Easter together with Balcerkówna.

'She's taken it to her mother's ... You don't ask whose it is if it tastes good ...'

But at those words of Jagustynka's Hanka shouted in anger:

'Józka! Call Pietrek! ... We must carry the rest to my storeroom.'

In a flash they'd moved it. She would have liked to roll the barrel of grain over too, to check it more freely, but she abandoned the idea: there were too many people about and they might tell the blacksmith.

Afterwards, the whole afternoon she lay in wait like a dog for Jagna and, when the other arrived at dusk, she got straight on to her about the meat.

'I ate it! ... It's as much mine as yours, so I cut off a piece and I ate it!' she replied firmly and though Hanka gave her no peace all evening, berating her implacably, she did not say another word, as though needling her deliberately. She even came for supper, cool as a cucumber, and looked her in the eye with a smile.

It was a wonder Hanka didn't go mad with anger that she could not get the better of her.

As a result, she gave everyone merry hell all evening at the slightest excuse, even chasing them off to bed early since it was Holy Thursday the next day and they would have to get on with tidying up.

She too went to bed earlier than usual, but could not sleep until long into the night. Hearing the fierce barking of the dogs, she got up and looked out.

The light was still burning at Jagna's.

'It's late, a waste of oil – it don't come for free!' she barked in the hallway.

'Burn some yourself, all night long if you like!' Jagna replied through the door.

Hanka got so angry again that she didn't doze until after the first crowing.

Early in the morning, right at dawn, Józka, though she was the biggest sleepyhead, was the first to leap out of bed, remembering her shopping trip, and ran to wake the boys to get the horses ready. She even dug her heels in hard when Hanka ordered Pietrek to harness the bay to the cart.

'I'll not go on a pile of planks with a blind mare!' she yelled in tears. 'Am I a beggar that gets carted about on a pile of dung? They know whose daughter I am in town! Father would never allow it ...'

She raised such a fuss that she got her own way and set off in the brithcka with a pair and the farmhand on the front seat, as a mistress of the house was wont to travel ...

'And buy red paper and gold and any others there are!' Witek called after her from the vegetable patch where he'd been breaking clods and hoeing since dawn, as Hanka meant still to get the seedlings in today. When the mistress did not appear from the cottage, he ran out on to the road and went sounding rattles at the fences with the other boys, as was the custom every Great Holy Thursday, when the bells had fallen silent.²

The weather looked set to be like yesterday's; but it felt sad outside somehow and quieter. The cold had settled in the night and the morning rose misty and chilly and hoary with dew. Even by broad daylight, the swallows were still hunched twittering on the roofs and the geese driven out to the pond honked loudly, but the villagers, as soon as daylight began to swell, got straight to their feet.

It was a long time yet until breakfast, but already there was bustling and commotion. The children, sent outside out of the way, hung about the lanes, chattering and clacking their rattles.

Hardly anyone even went to Mass, said today without music or bells.

It was the last chance to set about the holiday preparations, and especially to bake bread and make dough for cakes and fancy sweet rolls shaped into little figures. In almost every cottage, the windows and doors were tightly shut so that the dough would not catch cold, and fires blazed and smoke puffed from the chimneys into the cloudy sky.

The livestock bellowed in the byres, chewing at their mangers with hunger. Pigs rooted in the yards, fowl roamed the roads and the children did as they pleased, tussling with each other and climbing trees for crows' nests, since there was no one to stop them. All the women were so preoccupied with kneading and shaping loaves, wrapping bread troughs and basins of dough in quilts to help them rise before getting them into the oven, that they were deaf to the world, concerned only that their loaves and cakes should neither sink nor burn.

And everywhere it was the same – at the miller's, the organist's, at the presbytery, at the cottage of every farmer or hired hand – for even the very poorest had to prepare some kind of blessed basket for themselves, whether on credit or for their last quart, so that at least once a year, at Easter, they could eat as much as they liked of meat and other tasty things.

Since not everyone had a baking oven, the gardens between cottages swarmed with lasses carrying armfuls of kindling, or women would appear by the pond, dishevelled and covered in flour, carefully carrying massive pastry boards and basins full of dough with pillows tucked around, as though bearing sacred relics in procession.

In church the work was in full flow: the priest's farmhand was carting spruce from the forest while the organist, together with Rocho and Ambrozy, began dressing the tomb of the Lord Jesus.

The next day, Friday, the work so intensified that hardly anyone noticed the arrival of the organist's Jasio, who had come home from school for the holiday and was strolling about the village and peering in at the windows, since it was impossible to call in on anyone or have a chat.

For how could one when entry to every cottage was blocked, as everywhere that day the paths and even gardens were heaped with cupboards, beds and implements of all kinds, while folk whitewashed their rooms at high speed, scrubbed floors and cleaned the pictures, now ranged outside along the walls in front of the houses.

Everywhere such tumult and commotion reigned as people galloped about, hurrying each other and creating yet more din, even chivvying the children to scrape up the mud in the yard and sprinkle yellow sand. And since, according to ancient custom, it was not seemly to take hot meals from early on Friday until Sunday, they went hungry a little for the glory of God, making do with dry bread and baked potatoes.

Aye, those days at the Borynas' were spent exactly as elsewhere, with the one difference that there were more hands and less penny-pinching, so that the preparations were more speedily completed.

On Friday, at dusk, Hanka and Pietrek had finished whitewashing the chamber and cottage, so she began hurriedly to wash and get ready for church, as the other women were already on their way for the placing of Christ's body in the tomb.

A great fire was burning in the range, and in a cauldron that two people would be hard pressed to lift a whole pig's leg, quickly smoked yesterday, was cooking, while sausages bubbled in the smaller kettles, filling the room with such aromas, tickling the nostrils, that Witek, who was whittling something with the children, kept sniffing and sighing.

Beside the chimney, by the light of the fire alone, Jagna and Józka sat peaceably, engrossed in decorating eggs, each guarding her own separately and secretly, in order to show off the most. Jagusia washed hers first in warm water and dried them thoroughly before making all kinds of markings in melted wax, then she lowered them into boiling, bubbling water in three mugs, into which she submerged each one by turn. It was tedious work, for the wax refused to stick in some places or the eggs would crush in the hand or crack in the boiling, but in the end they'd managed a score and ten and began showing them to each other and boasting of the most beautifully decorated.

But how could Józka compete with Jagusia! Boiled with flakes of rye and onion, hers had come out bright yellow, tricked in white curlicues and so fine that hardly anyone could have bettered them, but seeing Jagusia's, her jaw dropped in amazement and she was suddenly glum. Why, they shimmered before your very eyes. Red, they were, yellow, violet and blue as flax flowers, and things drawn on them so true to life as to be almost beyond belief: cockerels crowing on a fence; geese on another, hissing at a sow wallowing in the mud; then a flock of white doves over red fields; and others with patterns and wonders such as appear on windowpanes when the frost coats them in ice.

They exclaimed over them again and again, and when Hanka returned from church with Jagustynka, she too began to look. She said nothing, but the old woman, having examined each of them, whispered in astonishment:

'Where do you get it from? ... Well, well ...'

'Where? ... Why, out of my head and into my fingers!' ³ She was delighted!

'You should take the priest a few!'

'He'll be blessing food tomorrow, so I'll hand him some, maybe he'll take them ...'

'Even the priest won't ever have seen such beauties! Sure to be amazed!' Hanka muttered derisively when Jagna had gone over to her side, as it was late already.

Throughout the village, they sat up late that night too.

It was cloudy outside and dark, though peaceful, except for the mill rattling relentlessly. In the cottages the lamps were shining at the windows almost until midnight, so that strips of light fell across the roads and even trembled here and there across the water on the pond. Folk were sorting their Sunday clothes and still finishing their other tasks.

Saturday arrived, altogether warm if blanketed in flimsy mists, and somehow so merry overall that, despite the heavy toil of the previous day, folk rose briskly, ready to face any fresh tasks and troubles.

In front of the church, the air soon quaked with exclamations and running feet, for it was the custom since time immemorial that every Great Saturday the lads would gather early in the morning for the ceremonial burial of the rye soup and the herring – the worst tormentors during the Great Fast. ⁴ Since there were neither farmhands nor older lads, the village boys had arranged to meet, with Contrary Jasiek at their head. They'd snatched a great pan of rye soup from somewhere, to which they'd added all manner of foul ingredients.

Witek had been persuaded to carry the pan on his shoulders in a cheese net, while another boy walked alongside, dragging a herring whittled out of wood. The soup and herring walked in front as a pair, followed by a throng of boys shaking rattles, knocking clappers and shrieking until their throats gave out. Jasiek led them all, for though he was daft and an oaf, he had a gift for pranks. They processed right around the pond and had turned on to the poplar road by the church, where the burial was to take place, when Jasiek suddenly gave the pan such a whack with a shovel that it fell apart and the soup and all its various contents spilled over Witek.

There was such great delight they almost collapsed on the road, but Witek was cross and hurled himself at Jasiek with his bare hands, coming to blows with others too, until, breaking free, he ran back to the house with a roar.

Hanka added her own slap for the completely ruined spencer and shooed him off to the woods to fetch sedge and whortleberry branches.

Pietrek had a laugh at him too, nor did Józka spare him her mirth as she carefully spread the path across the yard right to the road with sand carted from the cemetery, where the yellowest kind was to be found. She sprinkled the whole drive in front of the porch and the path under the eaves, as though she'd wound a yellow ribbon around the cottage.

In Boryna's room, meanwhile, they had begun to prepare the blessed basket.

The chamber had been scrubbed and sprinkled with sand, the windows and walls were clean and the cobwebs swept away from the pictures, while Jagusia's bed had been covered with a beautiful shawl.

Hanka, Jagusia and Dominikowa, though they barely spoke to each other, had placed a great table under the gable window, just by Boryna's bed, covered with the finest white cloth, along the edges of which Jagusia had stuck a wide strip of red paper cuttings. In the middle, on the window side, they placed a tall painted crucifix, dressed with paper flowers, and before it, on a pot turned upside down, a sheep made of butter, so cleverly fashioned by Jagna that it looked as though it were alive: its eyes were rosary beads and its tail, ears, hooves and little banner were made of fuzzy red wool. Then came a semicircle of sourdough loaves made with fine flour and wheaten wheel cakes made with milk and butter. Next came various bright yellow cakes, thickly studded with raisins as though with little tacks, and there were smaller ones too – Józka's and the children's – and special ones with cheese, and others made with egg and dusted with sugar and coloured sprinkles. Finally they set down a huge basin with coils of sausage decked with peeled hard-boiled eggs, and on a baking tray a whole leg of pork and a great slab of brawn, the entire tray adorned with painted eggs. They were still waiting for Witek to stick in green whortleberries and entwine the whole table with sedge.

They had only just finished when the neighbouring women slowly began to bring in their basins, troughs and pots and stand them on the bench beside the table. The priest had ordered that the baskets for blessing were to be gathered in a few of the first farmers' cottages, since he did not have time to go around them all.

Since Lipce was the village closest to him, he blessed their baskets last, sometimes not until dusk.

The women continued on their way without stopping to chat, to get to church in time for the ritual of blessing the fire and water, having first quenched the fires in their own cottages, in order to light them again with fresh, blessed fire.

Józka too dashed off for this, taking the children with her.

But they were gone for some time, as the women did not return until noon, carefully shielding and guarding the candles they'd lit in church.

Józka brought a whole bottle of water and a candle with which Hanka lit the wood, all ready and waiting, and was the first to sip the blessed water, handing it on to the rest in turn – it was meant to guard against sore throats. Then she sprinkled the livestock with it and the trees in the orchard, since it was supposed to make them fruitful and ensure easy calving for the cows.

And later, seeing that neither Jagna nor the blacksmith's wife had thought of the old man, she washed him with warm water, combed his tangled hair and changed his shirt and bedding. Boryna submitted to everything, not moving even once, but lay as he always did, staring straight ahead and lifeless as ever ...

The holiday seemed to begin from noon in the village, and while there was still a heavier task or two to finish here and there, in the main folk occupied themselves with dressing for the feast, combing, washing and scrubbing the children, so that many a shriek of resistance escaped from the cottages.

They kept watch impatiently for the priest, who did not arrive from the manors until dusk but went straight to the village, dressed in a surplice.

The organist's Michal followed, carrying a basin with holy water and an aspergillum.

Hanka went out on to the road to greet him. The priest was in a hurry and went inside quickly, reciting the prayers, sprinkling the holy gifts with water before looking at Boryna's livid bearded face.

'No change, then?'

'Well, the wound's almost healed, but he's no better.'

Taking a pinch of snuff, he cast his eyes over those crowded on the threshold and in the hallway.

'Where's the boy who sold me the stork?'

Józka pushed the sheepish Witek from the fireplace into the middle of the room.

'Here's ten groszy. You've done well: there's not a hen left in the garden when he chases them! ... And who's visiting their husbands tomorrow?'

'Half the village is going!'

'That's good, but let it be peaceable and quiet, and come for the Resurrection. ⁵ I'll begin at ten, at ten, I say! And fall asleep in church and I'll tell Ambrozy to remove you!' he threatened, going out slowly.

The whole throng moved after him, accompanying him to the miller's.

Witek, showing Józka the copper coin, whispered crossly:

'My stork won't be scaring priest's chickens for long, oh no!'

They rushed off in opposite directions, for the mistress was returning to the porch.

It grew slowly darker. Dusk slipped over the ground, quiet as quiet, submerging the gardens, houses and fields around in a blue, barely transparent murk. Here and there the white walls of sunken cottages could be glimpsed and lamplight trembled across the orchards, while, high above, the pale sickle of the new moon sliced the bright sky.

The village was swathed in quiet and gloom. In the church, rising above the cottages, all the windows blazed and a wide belt of light beamed from the great open doors.

Soon the first carts began to arrive rattling at the graveyard and groups of people from more distant villages began to appear. From the Lipce cottages, too, they were leaving for church. Again and again, a beam of light would slant through an open doorway and sink into the darkened pond. Footsteps and muffled exchanges multiplied in the warm, misty air. Barely visible in the night, people greeted each other along the way, and like a ceaselessly swelling river, they flowed slowly towards the Resurrection.

Back at Boryna's, only Bylica and the dogs were left to watch the farm, along with Witek and Maciej Kłab, who were busily constructing a cockerel that they meant to take round at *Dyngus*.⁶

Hanka sent Józka ahead with the children and the farmhand; she intended to catch up later. Dressed already, she lingered over leaving, as though waiting for something, and kept going to the porch and scanning the road. Not until Jagna had left for church with the blacksmith's wife and she'd heard the blacksmith pass by with the Voyt did she return to the chamber, quietly directing some remark to old Bylica. While he stood watch in the yard, she tiptoed into her father-in-law's storeroom ... After a good half hour, she came out, carefully fastening up her bodice: her eyes shone and her hands were trembling.

She muttered something incoherent and left for the Resurrection service.

CHAPTER 5

It was dark and empty on the byways. Lights were going out in the cottages and the last few people were passing by. The church square was thick with carts and unharnessed horses;¹ only stamping and snorts could be heard in the gloom, while the manor carriages merged into the darkness under the bell tower.

Having adjusted her bodice once again in the porch and lowered her shawl to her shoulders, Hanka began to elbow her way through to the front pews.

The church was chock-full already. Crammed together, folk churned and seethed like water, accompanied by a murmur of prayers, sighs, coughs and greetings. They rocked from wall to wall, making the banners fixed to the pews and the spruce branches crowning the altars and walls sway under the pressure.

She had barely found her place when the parish priest came out to start the service and at once loud sighs and outstretched arms began to rise from the crush. They knelt down meekly, squeezing together even more, so that soon all the people were on their knees, arm to arm, soul to soul, like a field sown with heads. Catching the light, only eyes glittered in that gently rocking human cornfield, rising like butterflies towards the great altar, towards the figure of the resurrected Christ, who stood naked, bloody, covered in wounds, clothed in only a red cloak with a pennant in his hand.

Silence suddenly fell upon the church, as at noon in springtime when the sun bakes the fields, the wind drops, the ears of stooping wheat chatter together and somewhere high in the blue sky the songs of skylarks ring out sweetly ...

They immersed themselves slowly in prayer. Everywhere lips quivered and prayers were murmured with a hushed sigh, like steady rain dripping on leaves. Heads bowed ever lower, a moan breaking free somewhere, the hands of someone deep in prayer reaching out beseechingly towards the altar, or a whimper sounding pitifully as a chick's from the throng that huddled timidly together like low bushes in the shadows of the sombre aisles, lofty as an ancient forest. Though candles burned on the altars, a thick gloom filled the church, as the black night pressed in through the windows and especially through the great open doors, while the pale sickle moon peered from behind the clouds.

Hanka alone could not turn her mind to praying. Inside, she shook with fear, as though she were still there, in her father-in-law's storeroom.

Shivering all over, she could still feel the loose cold grain in her hands and shrugged her shoulders again and again to feel the bundle tucked safely between her breasts. She was trembling with such joy and fear combined that her rosary slipped often from her fingers. She forgot the words of the prayers, casting her feverish eyes over the people but seeing no one, though Józka, Jaguś and her mother and others sat nearby.

In the pews to the side of the altar, the young ladies from Rudki and Modlica and the ladies from Wola were reading from prayer books, while the landowners stood in the doors of the sacristy, conferring together. At a distance, on the steps of the altar, stood the miller's and organist's wives in all their finery. Meanwhile, before the altar screen, in the place taken by Lipce's first farmers, who always stood guard during the services, carrying the baldachin for the parish priest and leading him by the arm at processions, peasants from other villages now knelt pressed close together in a row, so that you could barely make out the Voyt, the Soltys or the blacksmith's red head among them.

Many a woman's eyes strayed in that direction, searching longingly for her own ... but in vain. There were villagers from Dębica, Wola, Rzepki, from the whole parish, but no one from Lipce to be seen; the first of them were absent today. The women's souls fluttered like frightened birds, so that many a head inclined towards the ground, many a piteous moan escaped from the throng, and the painful reminders of their abandonment scorched like a living flame.

For indeed it was the greatest feast of the year, after all. Easter, and so many strangers gathered here, and on all faces, though a little thinner after the fast, joy was spreading. How they preened themselves, parading their finery, spreading out in church like squires, looking about boldly as they took the first places, and they, Lipce wretches, what of them now, what? In darkness and cold and hunger, they must bite on bitter injustice and feed on sorrow and longing ...

A day of joy is approaching for all creation, but not for them ... poor wronged unfortunates ... Everyone will return together to their cottages, joyfully to take their holiday, their rest, their sustenance, spring sunshine, friendly talk, as the Lord God ordained, but not those poor abandoned waifs of Lipce ...

They will slip back, aching, to their empty homes and with tears will they nibble at their festive cake, and lie down to their rest with longing and tribulation ...

Jesus, my Jesus! Piteous, muffled sobs echoed around Hanka, until she came to, suddenly perceiving familiar faces and eyes glazed with tears ... Even Jaguś hung her head over her prayer book and heavy tears ran down its white pages, until her mother nudged her to pull herself together – as if she could! She managed to calm down until Antek came to mind so vividly that she could hear his ardent voice, just as at Christmas, and it seemed to her he was kneeling alongside, pressing his head to her knees ... Grief clutched at her heart and the tears fell of their own accord with sudden longing ...

Luckily, at that moment the priest began the sermon and a clattering echoed around the church as they rose from their knees, surging towards the pulpit in an even tighter mass and craning their necks towards the priest, who recounted the Lord's Passion, telling of how the nasty Jews had crucified him, how he'd come to save the world, how he wished to bring justice to the wronged, how he spoke up for the poor. So abject were the Lord's sufferings that he brought before their eyes that they grew agitated and many a peasant fist was clenched in vengeance, and the womenfolk sobbed aloud, fussing and dabbing their noses.

He preached to them at length, setting out everything in the greatest detail, until eyelids grew heavy with sleep, and in the corners folk were snoozing soundly. But towards the end he turned directly to the people and, leaning from the pulpit, he began to shake his fists energetically and shout that, every day, every hour and in every place, Jesus was tormented by our sins, slain by our grudges, godlessness and disobedience of divine commands, so that every person crucified him in themselves, with no care for his wounds or sacred blood, poured out for our salvation!

At this, all the people howled and a gale of crying and sobbing swept through the church, so that he stopped speaking. Only when they'd quietened did he begin again, but joyfully now and encouragingly he told of the Lord's Resurrection. Of that spring morning that the Lord in his goodness granted every year to sinful man, and always would, until that time that Jesus returned again to earth to judge the living and the dead, to put down the haughty and thrust the sinful into hell's fire for all time, and to seat the just at his right hand in eternal glory! A day would come when all injustice would cease, all injury would be paid its due, and the weeping of the suffering would end and evil would reign no longer ...

So fervently did he speak, so earnestly, that each word flowed sweet into their hearts and lit up their souls like the sun. A strange bliss suffused them all. Only the Lipce folk trembled with sorrow, and the memory of injuries dealt so painful a blow to their souls that they howled and prostrated themselves with tears, cries and sobbing, pleading for mercy and deliverance with pitiful moans and heartfelt anguish ...

Confusion arose, widespread weeping and cries, but others soon noticed and began to help up the Lipce women, to sit them down and encourage them with gentle words. The kind priest, wiping his tears on his sleeve, called out that the Lord Jesus sent trials to those he loved, and though they had done wrong, their punishment would soon be over, if they had but faith in the Lord's mercy, and that any day all the men would return ...

They calmed down at these words, much comforted and feeling more confident of heart.

And soon – after the priest had intoned the hymn of the Resurrection at the altar, when the organ boomed with all its might, the bells rang out into the whole wide world and the good father stepped towards the people with the Most Holy Sacrament in a blue cloud of incense and the din of ringing – a song burst forth from every throat. The crowd swayed. A gale of exultation dried all tears and transported souls, so that all at once, together, like a human forest, swaying and singing with one great voice, the procession set off after the priest. He held the monstrance before him like a golden sun, a beaming sun burning overhead, floating slowly above the numberless crowd, above the glowing lights, barely visible through the incense, wreathed in song and the gaze of all the folk, and carried aloft with love by every heart ...

Slowly, foot against foot in the terrible crush and singing at the tops of their voices, they processed around the church while the organ kept playing and the bells rang ceaselessly ...

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! The church boomed until the walls shook. Every heart and throat sang; voices blazed, flaming like the firebird,² and soared in a great festive cry that circled under the vaults, as though blinded by the heat, then flowed into the spring night, towards the sun somewhere, into the wide world, where only rapture can lift a human soul ...

Just before midnight, the service ended and people began to pour out hurriedly. Only Hanka stayed behind, deep in fervent prayer. So much encouragement had she drawn from the words of the priest, from the joyful singing and the service, and so strengthened was she by the memory of what she had achieved that day, that she spread all her joy at Jesus' feet, forgetting everything in prayer. Only the clinking of Ambroz's keys obliged her to leave the empty church.

Even her concern for Antek, which had preyed on her all this time, whimpering for the slightest reason, seemed suddenly to have died away, so very peaceful and sure did she feel inside.

After looking round for her household, she made her way home slowly, for the carts were trundling in an unbroken chain and people were walking in groups along the barely visible edges of the road. It was moonless and dark. Great grizzled clouds floated above, obstructing the dark blue expanses of the sky, where stars glowed in the distance.

The night promised to be warm, quiet and damp with heavy dew. A soft breeze came from the fields, bearing the rawness of soil and marsh and the honeyed scent of budding poplars and birches along the road. People swarmed in the shadows. A head occasionally loomed in the brightness of the clear air; footsteps and voices echoed everywhere, while dogs barked fiercely in the farmyards and lights glinted from the cottages. After checking the stables and byre along the way, Hanka went to the house. They were already going to bed.

'Let him only return and farm and I shan't say a word about the past,' she resolved, undressing for bed. 'But what if he goes with her again?' she thought suddenly, hearing Jagna return to her side of the cottage.

She lay in bed, listening for some time. It was quiet in the village; only the rattling of the last carts along faraway roads could be heard and voices fading into the empty distance.

"Then there'd be no God nor justice in the world!" Hanka whispered grimly, but she lacked the energy to reflect further, and was quickly overcome by sleep.

Lipce rose late the following morning.

Day was opening like a blue eye, veiled with sleep, but shimmering clear and bright, and still the village was slumbering.

They were in no hurry to relinquish their beds, though the day of the Lord's Resurrection was dawning.

The sun soon mounted in the east, making the ponds and dew glitter, and floated high in the pale sky, hailing the whole world with a song of warmth and light: Alleluia!

Huge and radiant, it sailed through earthbound mists, across gardens and cottages and fields, while birds burst into joyful song, the waters gurgled merrily, the forest murmured, the wind blew, young leaves rustled and the earth trembled, thick swathes of wheat rippling quietly and dew sprinkling the ground like tears.

Hej! A joyful day is come! Christ is risen! Alleluia!

He is risen, who was laid waste and slain by savage anger! He is risen again to life from darkness; from the ice and squall the Beloved One comes forth! He has conquered grim death, he has vanquished the unvanquished to win human happiness. In this springtime, in this fertile time, he rises above the earth, hidden in the holiest of sunlight, and sows festivity all around, wakens the faint-hearted, revives the dead, lifts the oppressed, makes fruitful the barren.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Thus did the whole world resound on this day of the Lord.

But in Lipce, it was a sadder and quieter year than years gone by.

They slept soundly. It was broad daylight and the sun was already climbing over the orchards before signs of movement came from the cottages. Double gates began to creak and yawning, tousled heads looked out on to God's world, which stood all in sunshine, ringing with the twittering of skylarks and dusted in fresh green.

At Boryna's, too, they'd overslept. Except for Hanka, who'd risen a little earlier and woken Pietrek to harness a horse and britchka while she set about preparing the blessed food. Józka, meanwhile, scrubbed the children none too quietly and dressed up in her best. Pietrek and Witek washed thoroughly at the well outside, while old Bylica just played with the dog on the porch, sniffing often to see if they were slicing the sausages yet.

According to custom, the fire was not lit in the stove, and they made do with cold food. Hanka had just brought it from Boryna's room and was dividing it between the plates, with an equal portion of sausage, ham, cheese, bread, eggs and sweet cake for everyone.

When she too was ready at last, she summoned everyone to eat and even went to fetch Jagusia, who soon arrived in all in her finery and looking so beautiful, her blue eyes shining like stars beneath her smooth, combed flaxen hair, it was as though dawn had appeared. But they were all equally festive, bright woollen skirts and bodices dancing before everyone's eyes. Witek too, though barefoot, was in a new spencer with shining buttons, which he'd begged from Pietrek, who today stepped out in completely new attire: a navy-blue kaftan and yellow breeches with green stripes. He'd shaved clean, cut his hair straight across his forehead like the other farmhands and had tied his shirt with a red ribbon, so that when he came in they were all amazed at the transformation and Józka even clapped:

"Well, I ... Pietrek? Your born mother wouldn't recognize you!"

"Fine lad, tall as a candle, now he's chuckled off Burek's coat," remarked Bylica.

The farmhand just gave a laugh, rolling his eyes towards Jagusia and clearing his throat, while Hanka crossed herself, drank a toast to everyone and bade them sit down to table. They took up the benches and even Witek sat down, though timidly, at the edge.

They ate slowly, savouring the blessed food in silence, for they'd done their share of fasting for many a week. The sausages gave off a powerful aroma, well flavoured with garlic, and the smell wafted about the chamber so that even the dogs fussed around the people, whimpering piteously. No one spoke until they'd worked hard to satisfy their first hunger. They ate in solemn silence, with only puffing and the smacking of lips to be heard, along with the gurgle of vodka, for Hanka did not begrudge anyone, encouraging them all to drink.

"Are we off soon?" Pietrek was first to ask.

"At once, right after breakfast."

"Jagustynka wanted to come to town with you," broke in Józka.

"I'll take her if she comes on time. I'll not wait."

"Do you want to take provisions?"

"For one stop. We'll be back come evening."

They carried on eating, eyes popping with pleasure. Their faces grew red and their hearts swelled with warmth, wellbeing and deep gladness. Slow as slow they ate, tucking away the food with intent, to get as much down as they could and savour the taste in the mouth for as long as possible.

Not until Hanka rose did the rest begin to heave themselves up from the dishes, with a fine weight in their bellies now, and Pietrek and Witek bore away what they hadn't finished to the stable.

"Get the horses ready now!" ordered Hanka, and with a bundle of blessed food for her husband that she could barely lift, she began dressing for the journey.

The horses were already waiting in front of the house when Jagustynka arrived, breathless.

"I very nearly didn't wait for you!"

"You're done with the blessed food already?" She sighed mournfully, sniffing the air.

"There'll be something for you too – sit down, have a bite ..."

Aye, the poor starved thing needed no compelling. She fell upon the food like a wolf, putting away whatever was to hand.

"The Lord Jesus knew what he were doing when he created a pig!" she whispered, once a little sated. "Strange it is that though you let it lie in muck when it's living, after death you're happy to soak it in vodka!" she joked in that way of hers.

"Your health – drink up and hurry, time's pressing."

And in the space of a prayer they were gone. Hanka called to Józka from the britchka not to forget about Father, so the girl quickly gathered all kinds of food on a plate and took it in. Boryna didn't answer her chatter or even glance at her, but ate greedily whatever she pushed into his mouth, staring with his lifeless eyes as always. He might have eaten more, but Józka got bored and ran outside to watch, as from almost every house women were leaving or coming out with bundles, so that a dozen or so carts were rolling towards town and a row of women walked beside the ditches, dressed in red, their bundles on their backs. When the last rumbles had died away, a strange sad silence and emptiness fell over the village: the day dragged slowly and a dull silence filled the roads, with none of the usual clamour at this hour, no singing or people, only children darting about here and there at the pond, lobbing stones at the geese.

The sun was climbing, spilling light everywhere. It was growing warmer. Flies were already humming at the windowpanes, swallows swooped avidly through the transparent air and the pond sparkled like fire, while the trees, as though floating in greenery, poured out their honeyed scents, glistening with freshness. From the vast fields, swimming in blue, came occasional cold earthy gusts and the singing of skylarks. The whole world breathed quiet springtime delight, and from the villages, barely visible in the distance, shimmering in a sunny haze, terse shouts sounded and the boom of pistol shots!

Only Lipce was empty and mournful as a funeral, except for the cattle which, let out to drink, wandered where they pleased, rubbing against trees and lowing at the fields turning green. The farmyards too were empty, as were the wide-open hallways. Sometimes, on the sunny side of a cottage, there might be someone warming themselves against the white walls, girls brushing their hair at open windows or old women sitting on the thresholds, picking over the children's hair.

Quietly, the sad and drowsy hours passed. Sometimes the wind gave the trees a shake so that they murmured low, leaning towards the cottages and glancing furtively into empty chambers. A flock of sparrows fluttered loudly from orchard to road, or the air was disturbed by the brief shouts of children as they chased crows away from the chicks.

My Jesus, this day never used to be this way, never!

The sun had climbed halfway up the sky, above the chimneys, when Rocho reached the Boryna house. After looking in on the sick man and chatting with the children, he sat on the porch in the sun, reading his book while keeping a sharp eye on the road. Before long, the blacksmith's wife appeared with her children, and after visiting her father, she sat down on the earth bench.

"Is your husband home?" asked Rocho after a long pause.

"Oh no! ... He's gone to town with the Voyt."

"The whole village is there today."

"Aye, the poor wretches will enjoy the blessed food."

"You didn't go with your mother?" he asked Jagna, who was coming out.

"Why would I!" She went out into the farmyard and looked longingly over the fields.

"She's a new woollen skirt on today!" Magda whispered with a sigh.

"It's Mama's, don't you recognize it, eh? And all the beads she's got on, those great amber ones are Mama's too!" Józka informed her mournfully. "Only the scarf on her head's her own ..."

"True, that much clothing left after the departed."² He wouldn't let us touch it, but he's given her the lot and now she parades about ..."

"Ha, and what's more, she complained to Nastka that they were stinking and musty ..."

"She can go take a sniff of the devil's dung!"

"Just wait till Father's better, I'll soon remind him of the beads. Five strings left, long as whips and huge as the biggest peas!"

Magda didn't answer. Sighing heavily, she began to pick over the hair of her youngest child.

Józka soon ran off to the village. At the stable, Witek was tinkering with his cockerel, while the children were frolicking with the dogs in front of the porch, under the watchful eye of Bylica, who guarded them like a mother hen. Rocho seemed to be dozing.

"Have you finished work in the fields?"

"So far as the potatoes are in and the peas sown."

‘Others haven’t got even that far!’

‘They’ve time still. They say they’ll let the men out for the second Sunday.’

‘Which know-all said that?’

‘Oh, various people in church! Kozłowa means to go beg the squire ...’

‘Silly woman – is it the squire has them under lock and key, eh?’

‘If he spoke up, they might let them out ...’

‘He has, more than once, and it’s not helped ...’

‘If he really wanted, but he doesn’t through anger at Lipce, my husband says ...’ She stopped suddenly, leaning her face in confusion over the child’s head between her knees, so that Rocho waited in vain for some other word.

‘When does Kozłowa plan to go?’ he asked curiously.

‘Right after noon, they’re off ...’

‘All they’ll gain is a walk and a breath of fresh air.’

She did not reply, for the squire’s brother had turned into the farmyard from the road – Pan Jacek, the one that was a bit of a fool. He took his fiddle with him everywhere, played under the figures of saints at the crossroads and hung about only with peasants. He walked hunched, fiddle under his arm, a pipe between his teeth, tall, thin, with a yellow beard and shifty eyes. Rocho went out to meet him. They must have known each other, for they went to the pond together and sat there for a long time on the stones at the edge, conferring about something quietly, so that the noonday bell had long rung when they parted. Rocho returned to the porch, but seemed dejected and gloomy.

‘Gentleman’s grown that sickly, I hardly recognized him!’ Bylica spoke up.

‘You knew him?’ Rocho lowered his voice, looking round at the blacksmith’s wife.

‘Oh, aye ... He were a tearaway when young, very ... A terror for the lasses ... plenty didn’t escape his clutches in Wola ...’⁴ I well remember what a team he drove ... how he carried on ... Oh, I remember ...’ the old man stammered.

‘He’s paid a heavy penance for it, heavy! So you’re the oldest in the village, eh?’

‘Ambrozy must be older, for as I recall it he’s always been old.’

‘He says himself that death’s forgot him!’ the blacksmith’s wife broke in.

‘That Reaper forgets no one. He’ll be leaving ‘im the longer so as he’ll repent the better, for he’s stubborn, aye ... He’ll wheedle his way however he can ... aye ...’ Bylica muttered quietly. They sat in lengthy silence.

‘I recall when there were fifteen farmers in all of Lipce,’ Bylica began again, stretching his hand out timidly towards Rocho’s tobacco.

‘And now there are forty!’ Rocho offered him the snuffbox.

‘And new ones waiting for plots. Be it a bountiful year or not, folk seem all the same to multiply, aye ... but the land don’t grow ... A few more years, and there’ll not be enough to go round ...’ He sneezed violently.

‘Is it not plenty tight in the village already!’ said the blacksmith’s wife.

‘True, and when the boys all marry, there’ll not be a single morgen for their children, aye ...’⁵

‘They must go out in the world!’ Rocho remarked.

‘With what? Bare hands to reap the wind?’

‘Haven’t the Germans at Słupia bought out the squire and now they’re building ... sixty morgen a settlement,’ said Rocho ruefully.

‘Aye ... so they say ... but the Germans are a different people, learned and wealthy. They trade with the Jews, and profit by other people’s injury ... Let them but grip the earth with their bare hands like peasants, they wouldn’t endure three sowings ... and they’ve bought up every last bit of land ... It’s that cramped in Lipce, people are choking, and that ‘un ... he’s got that many fields they’re almost lying fallow ...’ Bylica gestured towards the manor lands beyond the mill, running upwards along the forest, where the black outline of lupin ricks could be seen.

‘At Podlesie?’⁶

‘Right next to our land, just right for the buying, thirty farms it’d make, aye ... thirty ... But will the squire sell, when he’s no need of money? ... A wealthy man ...’

‘Ha! Wealthy, when he wriggles for a grosz like an eel in the mud, so that he’s borrowing from the peasants whenever he can. The Jews are pressing him for what’s theirs, what they gave for the forest. He’s got taxes owing. He’s not paying the manor hands – they still haven’t had their New Year’s payment in kind. He owes everywhere, and where will he get it, when the law’s forbidden felling in the wood till he comes to an agreement with the peasants? He won’t last long in Wola, no! They say he’s already looking about for a buyer ...’ The blacksmith’s wife was unexpectedly talkative, but when Rocho wanted to draw her by the tongue a little more, she clammed up, called the children and went off home.

‘She must know quite a bit from her husband, but she’s afraid to say ... Aye, the neighbouring fields are fertile, two-scythe meadows.’⁷ aye ...’ the old man thought aloud, gazing at the fields by the forest, where the grange buildings could be seen beyond the ricks. But Rocho wasn’t listening; he had spotted Kozioł’s wife standing at the pond with the women and he approached her quickly.

‘He, he! ... They’ve got the better of the squire ... My Jesus, wouldn’t the peasants make the most of it ... Aye, there’d be a whole new village, no lack of hands nor those hungry for land ... aye ...’ Bylica dreamed, tottering after the children, who had tumbled out on to the road.

The bell began to ring for vespers.

The sun was moving towards the woods already and the trees began to lay long shadows across the road and pond, while the early evening quietness so engulfed the world that even the distant rumble of carts, the cries of birds in the clearings and the quiet, poignant playing of the organ in church could be heard. Clogs clattered along all the little bridges as folk ran to hear the news from those beginning to drift back from town.

Meanwhile, at sunset, directly after vespers, the priest set off along the Wola road. To the manor for a ball, Ambrozy said, and right after his departure the organist and his whole household headed to the miller’s as guests. Jasio led his mother, all dressed up, and merrily greeted the girls staring from the farmyards.

A quiet dusk was shaking itself out over the ground. The sun went down, spilling its setting rays so wide that half the sky was flaming red, as though buried in burning coals. The waters smouldered and windowpanes flared. More and more carts kept arriving from town and shouts erupted more loudly all the time by the cottages.

Only Hanka was nowhere to be seen, but it was noisy and merry anyway by the cottage. Girls of Józka’s age had come to perch along the earth bench and porch, chirping like goldfinches and poking fun at Contrary Jasiiek, who’d come running after Nastusia, though she completely spurned him now, having someone else in her sights. Józka played hostess as well as she could, handing out sausage and cake made with eggs.

Nastusia took charge, being the eldest, and mocked the boy most, who, dolt though he was, tried to swagger like a lusty farmhand. There he stood before them all, in his striped trows, a new spencer and hat atilt, hands on his hips, saying with a laugh:

‘You must all mind me since I’m the only man in the village!’

‘Never fear, there’s still some to trot after the cows!’

‘Hark at that oaf – good for scrubbing potatoes!’

‘Or wiping kids’ noses!’ they shouted, one over another, bursting into loud laughter. But Jasiiek was unruffled. He sucked his teeth and declared:

‘I’ve no time for such chits! ... You’re still minding geese!’

‘Danced behind a cow’s tail himself last year and now he’s playing the farmhand ...’

‘And lost his trousers every day running that fast from the bull.’

‘Marry Jankiel’s Magda, she’d suit you down to the ground.’

‘Minding Jewish brats, she can wipe your nose while she’s at it.’

‘Or Agata, then you can take her to indulgences,’ they threw at him mockingly.

‘If I sent the vodka round to any of you lot, you’d be that grateful you’d be off on pilgrimage to Częstochowa and fast every Friday for joy!’ he replied.

‘And will your mother let you, when you’re needed at home to wash the pans and poke the chickens!’ Nastka cried.

‘Watch out, I’ll get mad and go to Marysia Balcerkówna!’

‘Go on then, Marysia’s waiting with a broom or something worse ...’

‘Let her just catch sight of you and she’ll let the dogs out.’

‘Don’t go losing anything on the way!’ said Nastuś with a laugh, tugging a little at his trousers, for all his clothes seemed to leave room to grow.

‘He’s getting the wear out of his granddad’s boots.’

‘His waistcoat’s from the waste heap which the pigs tore up.’

Their jests and laughter flew like hail together. He laughed too and sprang up to throw his arm round Nastka, but one of them stuck out her foot and he fell the full length of the wall, unable to get up, for they kept pushing him over.

‘Leave him be, do ...’ Józka hushed them, helping him get up, for though he was a duffer, he was a farmer’s son and a kinsman on her mother’s side.

And then they played blindman’s buff.

They chose Jasiek and, having bound his eyes, stood him opposite the porch while they ran in all directions, twittering like sparrows. He chased them with hands outstretched, bumping constantly into fences and walls. Though guided by their laughter, he could not easily grasp a single girl, for they flitted around him like swallows, nudging him as they passed, so that the yard was loud as a herd of colts racing over the pasture, with so much squealing, din and laughter the whole village could hear.

The gloom deepened, the sunset was fading but the fun did not flag, when suddenly the squawking of hens burst upon the farmyard.

Józka pelted off.

Witek was standing by the shed, hiding something behind him, and a Gulbas boy was crouching behind the plough so that only his flaxen head could be seen.

'It's nothing, Józka ... nothing ...' he whispered, confused.

'You were choking a chicken, the feathers are still flying ...'

'I only pulled a few feathers from the cockerel's tail. I need 'em for my bird. But not our cockerel, no, Józka! Gulbas brought one ... it's his ...'

'Show us!' she ordered sternly.

He tossed a bird to her feet, plucked clean and half dead.

'Not ours, for sure!' she said, unable to recognize it. 'But show me the toy.'

He brought the completely finished cockerel out into the light. It was whittled from wood and plastered with dough into which he'd stuck feathers so it looked alive, for it had a real head with a beak, stuck on a stick.

It stood on a board dyed red, and was so ingeniously fastened to a tiny cart that as soon as Witek pulled a long pole, the cockerel danced and stretched its wings, and young Gulbas crowed along, until the chickens answered from their perches.

'Jesus, I've never seen such a wonder in my life!' She squatted down beside it.

'Good, eh? I've done well Józka, eh?' he whispered proudly.

'You rigged it up yourself? Out o' your own head?' She was amazed.

'Yes, me! Jędrek just brought me a live cockerel ... Done it myself, Józka ...'

'Well I never, it moves like it's living, though it's wood. Show it to the girls! ... They'll be that surprised! ... Show 'em, Witek!'

'Nay, tomorrow we'll take it for *Dyngus*, then they'll see. It's just lacking a few rails, so it don't tip over.'

'See to the cows then and come inside to finish it, you'll see better ...'

'I will, only I still need to do something in the village ...'

She went back to the house but the girls had finished their games and were beginning to leave, for night was falling and lamps were being lit inside. Stars were appearing here and there, and the evening chill drew in from the fields.

All the women had now returned from town, but Hanka still was not back.

Józka organized a lavish supper: borscht made with sausage and potatoes liberally dressed with fat. She began to serve at the bench since Rocho was waiting, the children were whimpering to be fed and Jagna kept glancing into the room, when Witek slipped in quietly and soon squatted down by the steaming bowls. Strangely flushed, he ate little and his hands were trembling so much his spoon rang against his teeth. He ran off without finishing his meal.

Józka caught him outside by the sty where he was putting some of the pigs' food from the pail into his shirt and she insisted on knowing what had happened.

He evaded and dodged as best he could, but in the end he told the truth:

'I took my stork back from the priest!'

'Jesus, Mary – didn't he see you?'

'No, priest's gone out, dogs were eating and stork were standing on the porch! Maciuś saw and ran over to tell us! I wrapped him in Pietrek's capote so he wouldn't peck me and took him to a hidey-hole. Don't you breathe a word! In a few weeks, I'll bring him to the house. You'll see how he parades on the porch and no one's going to recognize him! Don't tell on me, though!'

'Ha! Have I ever? I'm amazed you dared, that's all. Jesus!'

'I took back what's mine. I said I wouldn't forget and I took him ... Aye, as if I tamed him so that others could have the joy of it!' he whispered and flew off into the fields somewhere. Before long he was back and sat by the fireside with the children to finish the cockerel.

In the chamber it had become sleepy and sad somehow. Jaguś went to her side, and Rocho sat in front of the house with Bylica, who was so sleepy he was almost keeling over.

'Go home – Pan Jacek's waiting for you there!' Rocho whispered to him.

'Waiting for me ... Pan Jacek ... I'll be off, then ... For me? ... Well ... well,' he stammered, amazed, quite revived, and left.

And Rocho was left on the earth bench, whispering his prayers, gazing into the night, into those endless heavenly distances that fair trembled with starry glimmering. Meanwhile, below, a sickle moon rose over the earth, piercing the darkness.

In the cottages, the lights were going out one after another, like eyes clamped shut in sleep. Quietness settled all around, disturbed only by the hushed fluttering of tiny leaves and the distant hollow babbling of the river. Only at the miller's were lights still burning at the windows and the merrymaking went on till late.

All was quiet in Boryna's room. Everyone had gone to bed, and the lamp was out, so that only the supper pans arranged in the chimney glowed in the light of the coals, and a cricket chirped somewhere in a corner. Rocho sat outside still, waiting for Hanka, but it was not until around midnight that hooves drummed on the bridge near the mill and the britchka soon pulled in.

Hanka was oddly sad and silent, and not until she'd eaten supper and the farmhand had gone to the stable did he dare ask:

'Did you see your husband?'

'I sat with him all afternoon! He's well and of good cheer ... He said to send his greetings ... and I saw the other men ... They're to let them go, but no one knows when ... I went to see the man who's meant to defend Antek too in court ...'

She did not tell what was weighing like a stone upon her heart, but gave only other bits of news, not touching on Antek, until she suddenly started weeping, and, though she covered her face with her hands, the tears slipped through her fingers.

'I'll come by in the morning ... you rest now. You've had a shock ... may no harm come to you because of it.'

'I wish I could just die and be done with suffering!' she burst out.

He shook his head and went out without a word, angrily hushing the barking dogs in front of the house and chasing them off to their kennel.

But Hanka, though she lay down quickly with the children, could not sleep despite her exhaustion. Why, Antek had greeted her like an irksome dog ... He ate the blessed food with relish, took the dozen zlotys, never asking where she'd got them, and didn't have a word of pity for her after her tiring long journey!

She told him how and what was being done on the farm. He did not praise her – on the contrary, he chided her crossly on many a point ... He asked about the whole village, but did not ask about the children ... She had gone to him with a faithful and loving heart, longing greatly for his affection; she was his married wife, after all, and the mother of his children. He did not even caress her, did not kiss her, did not concern himself with her health ... He seemed a stranger to her and looked on her as a stranger too, listening with one ear to her accounts, so that in the end she could not even speak. The self-pity choked her to the shedding of tears and then he even shouted not to come and start her bleating here! Dear Jesus, it was a wonder she didn't fall down dead ... After all her hard toil for his good, labouring beyond her strength, for all her sufferings – nothing in return: not one kind word, not one word of comfort!

'Jesus, have mercy, for I cannot bear it!' she moaned, pressing her head into the pillow in order not to wake the children. Every bone in her body shook with weeping, grief, humiliation and a terrible feeling of injustice!

She could not let herself be crestfallen there, in front of him, nor on the way back in front of others, so only now did she give way to grief, only now did she allow suffering to tear at her heart and the bitter tears to flow.

The next morning, on Holy Monday, the day rose even brighter, even more bathed in dew and blue mists, but also more sunlit and altogether more festive. The birds sang louder and a warm wind coursed through the trees, which murmured hushed prayers. People began the day more briskly, opening doors and windows, hurrying to look upon God's world: at the gardens draped in green; at the vast countryside bedecked in spring, all glittering with dew, drenched in joyful sunshine; at the fields where the winter crops, rocked by the wind, seemed to flow towards the cottages like tawny rippling water. Folk washed in front of their houses, their shouts carrying across the orchards. Smoke was already beginning to tumble from chimneys, horses whinnied in their stalls, gates creaked. People fetched water from the pond, cattle went down to drink, geese honked, and when the bells began to peal and their great voices began to boom and soar over the village, the fields, and distant woods, then the shouts grew even louder and hearts beat more buoyantly and merrily.

The boys were running about with sprinklers already, splashing each other, or hiding behind trees at the pond and drenching not only passers-by, but anyone who stepped over their own threshold, so that even the walls were wet and grey puddles formed in front of houses.

The commotion raged on every path and in every farmyard, with more yells, laughter and chasing as the girls joined in, drenching each other and racing about the gardens. Since there were so many and full grown, they soon got the better of the boys, pursuing them in all directions and romping so wildly that Contrary Jasiek, who had turned the fire-hose on Nastka, was set upon by the Balcerzek girls, who soaked him and even pushed him into the pond, making him a figure of fun ...

Enraged at the insult at the hands of the girls, he called on the Borynas' Pietrek for aid and so cleverly did they ambush Nastka that they got her in their grasp and led her to the well, where they soaked her so thoroughly that she shouted to high heaven ... Next, having enlisted Witek, Gulbas and some of the older boys, they snatched Marysia Balcerkówna and gave her such a bath that her mother came running with a stick to help her. They also cornered Jagna somewhere and splattered her in mud. Not even Józka escaped, though she begged and ran wailing to Hanka to complain.

'She's complaining, but she's that pleased her eyes are shining with mischief!'

'Those pox-ridden boys soaked me to the skin!' Jagustynka bewailed merrily, bursting into the cottage.

'As if those rogues'd let anyone past!' Józka complained, changing into dry clothes. But despite her trepidation she was out on the porch again, for the roads were thudding with the chase and the village was shaking with shouts. Almost mad with delight, the boys were roaming in great gangs, forcing anyone who came along under the sprinkler, so that finally the Soltys had to disperse the hooligans as it was impossible to step outside.

'You don't seem so well after yesterday?' whispered Jagustynka as she dried her back by the range.

'Aye, it's moving and kicking all the time. I feel faint too ...'

'Lie down. You need to drink a hemp infusion! You were too shaken yesterday!' She was much concerned, but scenting the aroma of the fried black pudding, she sat down with the others to breakfast, greedily seeking out the biggest piece.

'You must eat too, mistress: fasting won't help your health ...'

'Meat makes me feel sick. I'll boil some tea.'

'It's not bad for flushing the guts, but you should take some boiled vodka with some fat and roots. That'd help more quickly ...'

'Aye, that's medicine to get a dying man on his feet!' Pietrek said with a laugh. He had taken a place next to Jagusia and kept looking into her eyes, politely passing her anything she merely glanced at, and engaging her constantly in talk, but since she fended him off at every turn, he began to question Jagustynka about Mateusz, Stach Płoszka and the others.

'I saw them all, of course, as they're together. Rooms like at a manor, high, light, with a proper floor, except for the iron cobweb at the window, should they fancy a stroll. And the food's not bad either. Pea soup they brought at midday, I tried it: tasted like it were flavoured with an old boot and dressed with cart oil. Then for afters they gave 'em roast millet ... well, Łapa would have cocked his leg at it without even taking a sniff. They eat at their own cost; if you've no money, you can add but a prayer to your victuals,' she answered mockingly.

'Will they soon start setting 'em free?'

'They said some of 'em would come out the second Sunday!' she said, lowering her voice and peering anxiously at Hanka. Something seemed to oust Jagna from her seat, for she ran out without finishing her food, and the old woman began to speak of Kozłowa.

'They came back late and with nothing. All they did was stretch their legs and get a look at the manor! They say it smells different than a cottage! ... The squire told 'em he cannot help anyone, for it were a case for the commissioner and authorities, and even if he could, he'd not stand up for any man of Lipce, for he'd suffered most injury through them! You know they forbid him to sell the wood, and now the buyers are taking him to court. Apparently he cursed and shouted that if he were sent packing on account of the peasants, then he wishes a plague upon the whole village! ... Kozłowa's been running around the cottages with that news since morning and threatening revenge.'

'The fool, what hurt will her threats do!'

'Who knows, m'dear. Even the poorest can happen upon a weak spot ...' she broke off, jumping up to catch Hanka as she slid down the wall.

'Heavens! That it shouldn't come too quick before time,' she whispered in alarm, pulling her towards the bed, for Hanka had fainted in her arms. Beads of sweat appeared on her face, which was covered in yellow patches. She lay barely gasping. The old woman rubbed her temples with vinegar and not until she'd pushed horseradish under her nose did Hanka come round, opening her eyes, and hiccupping.

They went off to do the chores. Only Witek was left and, spying a good moment, began to beg the mistress to let him go out with the cockerel ⁸.

'Oh, off you go, just mind you behave and don't mess your clothes! Tie up the dogs, so they don't run after you to other villages. When are you off?'

'Right after church.'

Jagustynka stuck her head out of the window and asked:

'Where are the dogs, Witek? I took something out for 'em to eat, and called and there's not one to be seen!'

'True, they weren't in the byre this morning either! Łapa! Burek! Here!' he began to call, running out in front of the house, but they did not answer. 'They must have run out to the village, chasing the Kłąbs' bitch ...' he explained.

It did not occur to anyone to wonder where the dogs had got to – it was not unusual after all. It was only a little later that Józka heard a stifled whimpering outside somewhere, and, finding nothing, she ran off to the orchard, thinking it was Witek dealing with some strange dog. She was surprised to find no one, the orchard was empty and the whimpering had ceased; but coming back she came across Burek. He lay dead by the gable wall – his head smashed.

She raised such an uproar that everyone came running.

'Burek's dead! A thief for sure!'

Fear swept over them.

'What else could it be, in the name of the Father and Son!' yelled Jagustynka, spotting a great hole by the sill-beam at the same time and a heap of earth heaved out.

'They were digging to get into Father's storeroom!'

'You could get a horse into that pit!'

'It's covered in grain at the bottom.'

'Jesus, maybe there's robbers still in there!' yelled Józka.

They raced round to Boryna's side. Jagusia was not there. The old man lay facing the room. In the storeroom, meanwhile, which was dark as a rule, the light came bursting through the hole and they could easily see that everything was jumbled together like peas and cabbage. Spilled grain was scattered on the ground, together with clothes pulled down from the rails; even the skeins of yarn and wool lay tangled and dishevelled. It was impossible to tell what was missing.

But Hanka marked at once that this must be the blacksmith's handiwork. She went hot at the thought that, had she left it one more day, he would have found the money and taken it ... She leaned over the hole to hide her satisfaction from the others and check something in her bodice.

'Is anything missing from the byre?' she asked, as though suddenly suspicious. Fortunately, nothing was missing anywhere.

'The doors were properly shut!' Pietrek answered and, jumping straight down into the potato pit, he rolled away a huge bundle of straw that was blocking the entrance and pulled out a whining Łapa.

'The burglars must've chucked him down there, but strange that so fierce a dog should let 'em ...'

'And no one heard any barking in the night!'

They let the Soltys know of the matter, which flew around the village in a flash. People came rushing over to look, denounce and deliberate. The orchard was full of people, squeezing in as though to confession. Everyone stuck their head in the hole, said their piece and examined Burek.

Rocho too appeared and after reassuring a tearful, wailing Józka, who was telling everybody individually what had happened, he went to see Hanka, who was lying down again, but was somehow strangely peaceful ...

'I was afraid that you'd take it to heart too much!' he began.

'Eh ... he took nothing, thank God ... too late ...' she lowered her voice.

'Can you guess who?'

'I'd give my head that it were the blacksmith.'

'He must have been hunting with something in mind?'

'Aye ... only it slipped out of his grasp. I'm only saying to you, mark ...'

'Aye, you'd have to catch him red-handed or have witnesses ... Well, what a person will do for a grosz!'

'Don't say a word even to Antek, dear friend!' she begged.

'You know I'm not quick to share confidences, and it's easier to kill a person than to give birth to one. I knew he was a rogue, but I wouldn't have suspected him of this.'

'He's capable of worse, I know him well ...'

The Voyt arrived with the Soltys and began to examine everything carefully and question Józka.

'If Koziol weren't inside, I'd say it was his doing ...' the Voyt whispered.

'Quiet, Piotr, his wife's heading our way.' The Soltys nudged him.

'They must have got a fright since they took nothing.'

'Certainly, the gendarmes must be told ... Here's new devilry that a man can't even take his holiday in peace ...'

The Soltys suddenly leaned down and lifted a bloody iron rod.

'This is what did for Burek!'

The iron rod was passed from hand to hand.

'It's a tool for forging the teeth of a harrow.'

'They could've stolen it from Michał's forge.'

'Forge has been closed since Friday.'

'We should have asked the blacksmith if he's missing anything.'

'They could just as well have brought it with them as stolen it. I, the Voyt, say so, and the blacksmith's not in. What's to be done is my and the Soltys' business!' He raised his voice, shouting that they should not hang about needlessly but go home.

No one was scared of him, but since it was time for church they soon went their separate ways, for more people from other villages had started to pass the fences and more carts were rumbling over the bridge.

When it was completely empty, Bylica slipped into the garden and at last began to look at his dog and talk to him quietly.

The house too had emptied. They had gone to church. Only Hanka was left, lying in bed, saying her prayers and thinking of Antek, so that it became very quiet, for the old man had taken the children out on the road, and she fell fast asleep.

It was noon by now, the sun beat down and, in the hush, folk's singing could be heard from church, making the windowpanes hum. They'd rung for the Elevation and still Hanka slept. She was finally woken by the rattle of carts pelting over the potholes, for it was the custom on the second day of Easter, after the High Mass, to race and see who could get back to their cottage first, so that carts flashed by through the trees, crammed with people lashing their horses with whips. They dashed along, making the cottage shake, and the din of clattering and laughter flew past like a gale.

She wanted to get up and look, but the others were returning. Jagustynka, bustling over dinner, explained how so many people had turned up that half didn't have a place inside the church, that all the manors had come down, and after the Mass the priest had summoned all the farmers to the sacristy and conferred with them there, while Józka, as usual, told of the manor ladies and how they were dressed up.

'You know those young ladies from Wola heave these humps behind 'em on their backsides, like turkeys when they've spread out their tails.'

'They stuff straw down there, or maybe rags,' the old woman was explaining.

'And their waists are like a wasp's – you could slice 'em with a whip, you cannot tell at all where their bellies have got to ... I had a look close up.'

'Where?' They shove 'em under their corsets. A woman who'd been a maid at the Modlica manor told me how some of the manor ladies don't eat and tighten their belts at night so as not to get fat. It's the manor fashion, to make every lady look thin as a stick, only bulging behind.'

'It's different in the village – the lads poke fun at the skinny ones.'

'Of course! A lass should be like a sticky fly trap, well grown everywhere, so that when you press against her it's like a hot stove ...' said Pietrek, gazing at Jagusia as she pulled out the pots from the range.

'Hark at him, the monster. Had his rest, filled up on meat, and now look what other tastes have taken his fancy!' Jagustynka rebuked him.

'When a lass like that gets to work, it's a wonder her skirt don't bust ...'

He was warning to his wit, but Dominikowa had arrived to look at Hanka, and they chased him out of the room.

They served the dinner soon on the porch, where it was warm and sunny. The young green leaves glistened, trembling quietly on the branches like browsing butterflies, and the orchard was full of the chirping of birds.

Dominikowa forbid Hanka to get up. As Weronka and the children arrived right after dinner, they pushed a bench up to the bed and Józka brought some of the blessed food and a bottle of vodka with honey, so that Hanka, with some difficulty, could receive her sister properly along with the neighbours who began to come visiting, according to custom, one after another, to commiserate, take a drop of vodka, savour the sweet cake and tell neighbourly bits of news, mainly prattling on about the digging under the storeroom.

Meanwhile, the inhabitants of the house sat warming themselves outside, chatting with the people who kept coming to the garden and gravely examining the pit that was still not filled in, since the Voyt had forbidden it before the arrival of the clerk and gendarmes.

Jagustynka was just recounting the tale for the umpteenth time that day, when the boys came tumbling in from the yard with the cockerel. Witek was at their head, all smart, with shoes even, and sporting Boryna's cap at quite the tilt. Fast on his heels came Maciuś Kłab, the Gulbas boy, Jędre, wry-faced Grzela's Kuba, and others. They had sticks in their hands and bags across their shoulders and Witek had tucked Pietrek's fiddle under his arm. They paraded on to the road and set off first for the priest's, as the farmhands had done in previous years. Going boldly into the garden in front of the presbytery, they arranged themselves in a row, pushing the cockerel in front. Witek set to on the fiddle, young Gulbas began winding up their marvel and crowing, and all of them, beating time with their sticks and stamping by turn, began to sing in shrill voices:

*'We've come after Dyngus,
To sing about Jesus,
O Jesus, O Maria –
Our cap is right here!'*

They sang a long time, growing bolder and louder, until the priest came out and gave them ten groszy each, praising the cockerel and dismissing them kindly ...

Witek had broken into a cold sweat for fear that he might ask about the stork, but the priest didn't recognize him among the others. He went inside and sent out a girl with the sweetest of cakes, so that they burst into a song of thanks and trailed off to the organist's.

Then they visited all the cottages, followed by screaming children who clustered round in such a swarm they had to defend the cockerel from the crush, since they wanted to touch every feather and move the stick.

Witek led, keeping a watchful eye on everything. He signalled with his foot when to begin, and with his bow directed when to draw out a high note and when a low one; they also entrusted all the gifts to him. And such a parade they made and so much noise that the singing and fiddle resounded throughout the whole village, and people were greatly amazed that these striplings, barely off the ground, were carrying on like farmhands.

The sun was in the west already, flushing a little as it rolled over the woods, and little white clouds scattered about the blue sky like a countless flock of geese. The wind moved high above, flicking the tips of the rust-red poplars, and in the village it became increasingly busy and noisy: the old folk conferred before the cottages, sitting about the porches, while beneath the trees it teemed with lasses, bright as poppies or nasturtiums. Frolicking by the pond or sauntering about, arms about each other's waists, swaying and crooning songs, they were reflected in the water as in a mirror. The children ran about with the *Dyngus* boys, while yet others wandered across the fields along the baulks.

They were ringing for vespers already when Płoszka's stout wife, who'd gone to visit Boryna first, came in to Hanka.

'I've seen the sick man. Jesus, he lies there, same as ever ... I spoke but he didn't even glance at me. The sun's shining on to his bed and he just rakes at it with his fingers, as though he wanted to catch hold of it, his hands scrabbling like a little child's! Fair makes you weep, to see what the man has come to!' she said, sitting down by the bed, but she took a drink just like the others, reaching for the cake. 'Must be eating now, though, for seems to me he's put on weight?'

'Pretty well. Perhaps he's getting better!'

'The boys have gone to Wola with the cockerel!' Józka declared, bursting in, but seeing Płoszkowa, took herself off outside to Jagna.

'Józka, time to see to the cattle!' Hanka called.

'Indeed, a holiday is as a holiday does, but the belly never ceases to cry hunger! They came to mine with the cockerel too ... He's canny, your Witek, a good boy by the look of him.'

'Aye, when it comes to pranks, he's first, but needs a stick taking to him when there's work to do!'

'My dear, when it comes to work, it's the same everywhere! The miller's wife complained to me of her lasses, that she cannot keep 'em for more than half a year.'

'They seem to get themselves children there very quick ... All the fresh bread must help!'

'Bread's bread, but it's the apprentice makes 'em, or when that son of hers that's away at school looks in, and they do say the miller himself won't let any pass ... so it's hard to keep a girl a year. Though it's true that the hands are grown bolder ... My lad for the grazing, since there are no men at home, treats me like a dog and demands milk for his supper! Did you ever hear the like?'

'I've a farmhand so it's no news to me what demands they have, but I have to agree to everything or he'll be off and away for work and how will I manage without him on a farm like this!'

'Have a care one of the others don't steal him,' she said more quietly.

'Have you heard something?' Hanka was not a little alarmed.

'In passing ... idle talk maybe, so I don't spread it about. Ha, yatter yatter, what was it I'd come to say? Some of the women promised to drop by, for a chat, we poor wretches together. You must come too ... for aye, how could the wife of young Boryna not be there, when the first farmers' wives are gathering.'

She flattered away, but Hanka excused herself as being unwell, and in truth, for she felt a little woozy. Płoszkowa, greatly put out, went off to invite Jagna.

But Jagna made her excuses, saying that she and her mother had already promised to visit elsewhere ...

'You should go, Jagna. You're lonesome for the men, and Ambrozy will look in at Płoszkowa's for sure, or one of the other granddads – it's still a pair of trousers ...' whispered Jagustynka by the cottage.

'You just can't help yourself, handling words like a knife ...'

'I'm a cheery soul, happy to give everyone what they're most in need of!' she mocked.

Shaking with anger, Jagna went out to the road, helplessly casting her eyes about and barely holding back the tears. Aye, she was terribly bored!

So what if it was a holiday, people swarming, the village shaking with shouts and laughter, or that even the grey fields glowed red with women, songs ringing out everywhere? ... She was sad and so full of strange longing she could hardly bear it. Since first thing that morning, something had been bothering and upsetting her, so that she flitted between friends' cottages, along the lanes, into the fields, and even changed her clothes at least three times, all in vain. Nothing helped: it tugged at her even more, the urge to run, do something, seek something ...

And again she took herself off along the poplar road and walked. Gazing at the huge red ball of the sun descending over the woods, she crossed the lines of shadow and shimmer that the sunset threw aslant between the trees.

A chilly gloom enveloped her, and the quiet warm breath of the fields ran through her in a pleasant shiver. The fading sound of village chatter followed her, and from somewhere a fiddle's plaintive voice tugged at her heart like the threads of a web humming with golden dew, spun beneath the hushed quivering branches of the poplars, in the shadows already lurking in the furrows and hiding in the blackthorn bushes.

She walked straight ahead, not knowing where she was going or why.

Sighing deeply, she stretched out her hands sometimes, sometimes stopping helplessly and looking about with feverish eyes, as though searching for some prop on which to support her tormented soul, but on she went, weaving fragile fleeting thoughts, like glittering threads on water that you cannot grasp, for the shadow of a hand will stir and make them disappear. She looked into the sun, seeing nothing. The poplars leaning over her in rows seemed like hazy memories ... It was only her own self that she felt strongly, and something that was tearing her apart to the

point of pain, to the point of shouting, to the point of crying, and it was carrying her off somewhere, so that she longed to catch hold of the birds heading west and fly to the edge of the world. Some kind of burning force was gathering inside her, so melancholy that tears misted her eyes and flames shot through her; she broke off sticky, fragrant poplar shoots to cool her burning lips and eyes ...

Sometimes, she'd sit, hunched, under a tree and, leaning her face on her hands, would sink into herself entirely, pressed taut against the tree trunk ... barely breathing ...

Spring seemed to have sung its blistering song within her too, where something stormed and stirred like fertile soil which, lying fallow, begins to burgeon in the spring. As in these trees, drunk on the force of growth, it sings and stretches with the sun's first warmth ...

She trembled inside, her eyes burned, while her legs buckled and faltered helplessly, barely able to carry her. She felt like crying, singing, rolling in the swathes of softest wheat, pearly with cool dewdrops, then she'd be seized by a mad desire to leap into the blackthorn, tear through the tugging thickets and feel the sweet savage pain of their yanking and wrestling.

Suddenly she turned back and, catching the voice of the fiddle, she ran towards it. *Hej!* How it spun her around with such giddy delight that she wanted to throw herself into dancing, into the noisy crush of the inn, into the tumult, be it into a drunken brawl, into perdition itself. *Hej!*

Someone was coming along the path leading from the graveyard to the poplar road as it flamed red in the sunset. Someone with a book in hand who was pausing beneath the white birches.

It was Jasio, the organist's son.

She wanted to look at him from the behind the tree, but he'd spied her.

Nor could she manage to flee, her legs seemed rooted to the ground and she could not tear her eyes away from him. He approached with a smile. His teeth shone between red lips. He was slender and full grown with a pale face.

'Do you not recognize me, Jagna?'

She felt weak in the stomach at the sound of his voice.

'As if I'd not recognize you! ... Only Master Jaś is grown so fine now, so different ...'

'Of course, the years go by ... Were you visiting someone at Budy?'

'I were just walking, it's a holiday after all. Prayers, is it?' She touched the book diffidently.

'No, it's about distant lands and seas!'

'Jesus! Seas! And the pictures are not holy ones, then?'

'Take a look!' He pushed the book under her eyes and showed her.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, unwittingly leaning hip to hip, heads bent low and touching. He'd explain something sometimes and then she'd raise eyes full of wonder to him, not daring to breathe for emotion, but shifting even closer to see better, when the sun went down behind the woods.

He suddenly shivered all over and shrank back a little.

'It's getting dark, time to get home!' he whispered quietly.

'Let's go, then!'

They went along in silence, almost hidden in the shadows of the trees. The sun had set. A bluish gloom trembled over the fields. The sunset had not lingered today, with just a hint of gold across the sky visible through the thick trunks of the poplars as the light faded.

'And is it all true, what's written there?' She stopped.

'Everything, Jagna, everything.'

'Jesus, such great seas, such places, it's hard to believe.'

'There are, Jaguś, there are!' he whispered more quietly than ever, looking so closely into her eyes that she held her breath. A tremor ran through her and, breast forwards, she leaned towards him yieldingly, waiting for him to seize her and press her against a tree trunk. She had opened her arms and was ready to give herself, but Jasio moved away hurriedly.

'I must hurry – good night, Jagusia!' And off he flew.

She stood there for the space of a good prayer before she could manage to move from the spot.

'Did he cast a spell on me or what!' she wondered, trudging heavily along. Her head was in confusion, shivers running through her. Evening was settling in. Lights glimmered here and there, and music and muffled conversations were coming from the inn.

She glanced in through the window into the lit-up room. Pan Jacek stood in the middle, sawing at his fiddle, while Ambrozy was swaying at the bar, recounting something loudly to the hired hands and reaching frequently for his glass.

Suddenly someone seized her tight about the waist so that she shrieked and shrank back, pulling away.

'I've nabbed you and I shan't let go ... Let's have a little drink ... come on ...' whispered the Voyt, not releasing her from his grasp and pulling her towards the side door to the snug. No one saw, for it was almost dark outside and hardly anyone was passing on the road. The village had grown quiet now. The babble of voices had died away and the farmyards emptied. Folk had gone home, the feast and days of sweet idleness were coming to an end. An ordinary day tomorrow was waiting on the threshold, baring its sharp fangs in the gloom, so that more than one soul flinched as worries gathered anew ...

The village had grown saddened and subdued, as though clinging closer to the ground and huddling in the muted orchards. Here and there, folk were still sitting on the earth benches finishing off the blessed food and chatting, while others were already preparing for bed, singing hymns all the while.

Only at Płoszkowa's was it still crowded and noisy, where the neighbouring women had gathered, filling all the benches and chatting sedately among themselves. The Voyt's wife took first place with mouthy, squat Balcerkowa at her side, holding forth. Skinny Sikorzyna was there too, and Borynowa, the sick man's sister-in-law, prattling without a pause. The blacksmith's wife had come, her youngest at her breast, chattering with the pious, quiet wife of the Soltys, and others who were first in the village.

They sat proud and puffed up as brood hens in a coop, all in their sumptuous Sunday woollen skirts, shawls let halfway down their backs in the Lipce fashion, with the whitest of bonnets tightly pleated over their foreheads, frilled collars standing stiff up to their ears. Around their necks they'd hung as many beads as they owned. They were having a grand time, their faces slowly flushing more deeply as they settled down contently, carefully adjusting their skirts so that they wouldn't crease and beginning to inch closer together, chatting more quietly, as they gossiped about each other.

By the time the blacksmith arrived, saying he was just back from town, they were in the best of moods. He had a mouth on him like no other, and since he was already a little drunk, he began to carry on for the hell of it so that they fair split their sides. The chamber shook, and he laughed loudest of all, so that the cackling was heard all the way to the Borynas'.

The party went on till late, for Płoszkowa sent to the Jew for vodka at least three times.

At the Borynas', meanwhile, they were still sitting outside. Hanka had got up and sat with the others, wrapped in a sheepskin since a chill had set in after sunset.

While daylight lasted, Rocho read to them from a history book, so that Hanka kept looking round, and more than once she'd order Józka quietly:

'Go check the road.'⁹

But there was no one there. Rocho read until evening darkened the earth, and then he spoke of all manner of things that greatly aroused their curiosity. Night fell around them and they could barely be made out against the cottage's white walls. The evening was starless, dark and chilly; a hollow silence engulfed the world, except for water bubbling somewhere and dogs growling.

They huddled close, with Nastka and Józka, Weronka and her children, Jagustynka, Kłębowia and Pietrek clustered around Rocho, almost sitting at his feet, and Hanka somewhat to one side, seated on a stone.

He told them various tales of the Polish people, or holy fables, or such wonders about the world that who could take it all in or remember it! They listened engrossed, not daring to breathe or move from their places, their souls drinking in his honeyed words, as dry ground drinks the warm and dewy rain.

He, meanwhile, barely visible in the gloom, spoke in a solemn quiet voice:

'After winter, spring comes to everyone who waits for it in readiness, work and prayer.

'Have hope, for those wronged always prevail.

'Human happiness must be sown with sacrificial blood and labour, and he who has sown will be fruitful and the time of harvest will come.

'But he who has a care for his daily bread alone will not sit at the Lord's table.

'He who complains of evil but does no good causes a greater evil.'

He spoke so long and so wisely, and ever quieter and more wistfully, that there was too much to take in. Since the night had completely swallowed him up, it seemed as though that holy voice was coming from the ground, or that it was the voice of dead generations of Borynas whom God had released into the world on that night of the Resurrection and who were now declaiming from the musty walls, from the trees bent low, from deepest night, to warn their kin and summon them to reflection.

In their souls, they all weighed up these words that rang in their hearts like a bell, carrying them away in vague longings, into the unfathomable wonder of dreams.

They didn't even hear the village dogs begin to bark, but then came shouting along the lanes and the drumming of feet.

'The woodland's burning!' shrieked a voice across the orchard.

They ran out on to the road.

It was true. The manor outbuildings at the forest edge were all on fire, flames exploding against the darkness like scarlet bushes.

'And the word was made flesh!' whispered Jagustynka, remembering Kozłowa.

'God's punishment is come.'

'For our wrongs!'

Voices crossed in the darkness.

The doors of cottages slammed. People were racing half dressed on to the road and an ever-growing crowd thronged the bridge by the mill where the view was best, so that in the space of a prayer the whole village was crowded there.

The fire grew with every moment. The grange¹⁰ stood on a hill by the wood, so though several versts¹¹ from Lipce, you could see the fire raging as though on the palm of your hand. Fiery tongues flared against the black wall of the forest and swirling blood-red clouds erupted. There was no wind and the fire rose higher and higher. Buildings burned like pitch-soaked logs and pillars of smoke billowed, while the crimson glare flooded the darkness like a fiery river and was hovering now over the wood.

Terrible bellows rent the air.

'The cattle shed's burning. They won't save many, there's but the one door.'

'The hayricks have caught now!'

'The barns are in flames!' they cried in terror.

The priest ran up, the blacksmith, the Soltys, and finally the Voyt too appeared from somewhere, though so drunk that he could barely stand. He began yelling and haranguing the people to run and help the manor.

But no one was heading there in a hurry, and only an angry growl broke from the crowd:

'Set the men free and they can run to the rescue!'

And neither threats nor curses helped, nor even the priest's tearful pleading: folk stood unmoved and stared darkly at the fire.

'Son-of-a-bitch manor scum!' yelled Kobusowa, shaking her fist.

So that only the Voyt, the Soltys and the blacksmith left for the fire, with empty hands, for not a cottage would permit them to take either hook or bucket.

'The stick for anyone who dares touch 'em! To the death!' they screamed as one.

The whole village had gathered now, down to the youngest, whom they rocked wailing in their arms. They surged in a great, grim throng, with hardly anyone speaking, and then only in a whisper. Devouring the sight with greedy eyes, they sighed, for in every heart burgeoned a strictly hidden joy that the Lord God had punished the squire with fire for the wrongs done to Lipce.

It burned long into the night, and no one went back to their houses but awaited the end patiently. A sea of fire now rolled over the grange, piling into the sky in waves. Burning sheaves of thatch and shingles scattered a bloody rain, and the tips of trees and the roof of the mill turned brown in the red glow, while the pond seemed strewn with pale embers.

Shouts, bellows, the rumbling of carts and the terrible horror of destruction pulsed from the fire, and the villagers just stood there, like a living wall rooted in the ground, eyes and souls feeding on vengeance ...

Meanwhile, from the inn came Ambrozy's hoarse, drunken voice:

'O Mary, Mary mine!

The ale you brew's so very fine!

CHAPTER 6

Hanka tried to rise from the bed at the strange news but Jagustynka caught hold of her in time and pushed her back against the pillows.

'Don't you move, nothing's burning!'

'But he said something that odd, his mind must be wandering! Douse your head with holy water and the fever'll pass.'

'No, Hanuś, I'm in my right mind and I spoke true, that Pan Jacek has been living at mine since yesterday ... aye ...' stammered Bylica, bending to sneeze after a hefty pinch of snuff.

'He's completely lost his mind! Look and see if they're coming back – they'll starve the baby.'

'No one coming from church yet!'¹ Jagustynka declared a moment later, and again set about tidying the room, sprinkling it with sand.

The old man sneezed with a vengeance, again and again, making him plump down on the bench.

'You're bad as the trumpet at market in town!'

'Strong baccy. Pan Jacek gave me a whole packet ... a whole one ...'

It was still early morning. A warm bright sun peered in at the window. The trees in the garden were swaying in the wind. The geese were stretching their necks and red hissing beaks through the open door to the hallway while their squealing goslings scrambled over the high threshold; the whole flock was smeared in mud. Suddenly a dog growled somewhere, making the geese scream, while the brood hens sitting on their eggs began to squawk anxiously and fly down from their nests.

'Chase them out to the orchard, maybe they'll play in the grass.'

'I will, Hanka, and I'll keep watch for the crows ...' said Bylica.

The room grew quiet. Only the murmur of trees reached them from outside, while the lamps hanging from the black ceiling swayed gently.

'What are the lads up to?' Hanka asked after a long pause.

'Pietrek is ploughing the potato field on the hillside, and Witek's got the gelding harrowing the fields for flax in that mucky hollow,' said Jagustynka.

'Is it still wet there?'

'Aye, your clogs sink right in, but it'll dry quicker after harrowing.'

'Maybe I'll be up by the time the ground's warm enough for sowing ...'

'You think of yourself for now. No one'll be stealing your work from you!'

'Are the cows milked?'

'I did it myself. Jaguś left the pails by the byre and went off somewhere.'

'She's always away to the village like a dog, and never at hand to help. Ha, tell Kobusowa that I'll give a strip for cabbages and Pietrek will cart the dung over from hers and plough it in, but for four days' work in exchange! She could do half the time planting potatoes, and the rest at harvest.'

'Kozłowa would also like a strip for flax in exchange.'

'She'll do as much work as a dog's tears. Let her look elsewhere. Didn't she do enough barking last year to the whole village about how Father had done her wrong?'

'As you please – it's your land, so you decide! Filipka came by yesterday about the potatoes while you were in labour.'

'For money?'

'In exchange for work; there's not a glimmer of a grosz in that cottage – they're dying of hunger.'

'Let her take a bushel to eat right off, and if she wants more, then not till after planting, for there's no knowing how many'll be left. Józka'll measure 'em when she's back, though she's not much of a worker, that Filipka, well! ... Thinner all the time ...'

'How's she to get stronger? Too little food, too little sleep, and a baby every year.'

'Nothing but ruination, my Jesus! The harvest's still over the hills and far away, and scarcity's around the corner.'

'Round the corner? It's already sitting in some folk's houses, squeezing at their bellies so's they're barely gasping.'

'Did you let out the sow?'

'She farrowed by the wall. The piglets are beautiful, round as buns.'

Bylica stood in the doorway and stuttered:

'I've left the geese under yon gooseberries. Pan Jacek came at Easter and he says: "I'm moving in with you, Bylica, as a hired hand and I'll pay you well ..." I'm thinking: aye, he's making fun with a peasant like the masters love doing, and I say: "I'm in need of a grosz and I've free rooms!" So he laughs and gives me a packet o' Petersburg, looks over the cottage and says: "If you can manage here, then so can I. We'll fix it slowly and it'll be a proper manor!"'

'Well, I never – gentry too, squire's brother!' said the old woman in surprise.

'He made a bed next to mine and there he is. When I went out, he were smoking on the threshold and tempting sparrows wi' grain.'

'And what'll he eat?'

'He brought pots with him and he's forever boiling tea and drinking it ...'

'He's not doing it for nothing. There must be something up, a gentleman like that ...'

'There is, aye – he's gone completely mad! A body's always striving and struggling to make things better. Why would such a gentleman want what's worse? He's lost his mind, cannot be anything else,' said Hanka raising her head, since voices could be heard in the farmyard.

They were coming back from church from the christening. First came Józka, carrying the child on a pillow, wrapped in a shawl, under Dominikowa's supervision, and after them the Voyt and Płoszkowa, who'd been invited to be godparents, with Ambrozy hobbling behind, unable to keep up.

But before they could cross the threshold, Dominikowa took the child and, crossing herself, began, according to old custom, to walk right round the house, pausing at each corner to say:

*'From the East comes the wind ...
From the North comes the cold ...
From the West comes the dark ...
From the South comes the warm ...
And on every side beware of evil, human soul,
And may your hope be in God alone.'*

'So pious, Dominikowa, yet such a wise-woman!' the Voyt said, laughing.

'Prayer helps, but chanting does no harm, goes without saying!'² whispered Płoszkowa.

They entered the chamber noisily. The old woman unwrapped the child and handed it to its mother just as the Lord God had made it, naked and red as a crab.

'We bring you a true Christian, Mother, named Rocho at his holy christening. May he grow strong and bring you comfort!'

'And may he spawn a dozen Rochos! Stout lad: he yelled that hard there were no need to pinch him, and you couldn't but laugh, the way he spat out the salt ...'³

'Because he comes from stock that's not forsworn the vodka ...' piped up Ambrozy.

The boy squealed and kicked his legs on the quilt. Dominikowa wiped his eyes, lips and forehead with vodka and only then did Hanka put him to her breast. He latched on fiercely and soon quietened.

Hanka thanked the godparents sincerely, kissing everyone and apologizing that the christening was not as it should be for a Boryna child.

'You'll have a fourth in a year's time and we'll make amends for it then!' joked the Voyt, wiping his whiskers, for a glass was now coming his way.

'A christening without the father's like a sin without absolution,' Ambrozy said imprudently.

Hanka burst into tears at this until the women began to drink her health and take her in their arms to cheer her. Consoled for her woes, she invited them to eat, as they could already smell the bowl of scrambled eggs and sausage.

Jagustynka did the honours, as Józka was busy singing the baby to sleep in a big trough since the old cradle was lacking its rockers.

The spoons scraped at length with not a word escaping anyone.

Several children had gathered in the hallway by now and were peeping around the door so the Voyt threw a handful of caramels into the yard, for which they scrambled, squealing and jostling.

'The cat's got even Ambrozy's tongue!' Jagustynka began.

'I'm thinking to myself that the boy needs a farm preparing and a lass.'

'Land's the father's bother, and the godparents'll see to the lass.'

'There's no lack of those! They're fair lining them up, with a dowry to boot.'

'Seems the Voyt's wife's pining for a little one. I saw how she were airing the clothes of her poor dead baby!'

'Happen the Voyt's promised her a christening for the autumn!'

'He won't shirk his duty, an official like him!'

'It's sad in a house without the shouts of children!' said the Voyt gravely.

'True, they bring many a headache, but help too, and comfort ...'

'A treat, for sure! Even gold can be bought too dear!' muttered Jagustynka.

'There are bad 'uns, true, holding their fathers as nothing. Harsh to say, but the apple don't fall far from the tree – you reap what you sow!' said Dominikowa with a sigh.

Jagustynka bristled, sensing she had her in mind.

'Easy for you to mock, when you have such good lads who'll spin and do the milking and wash the pots like the canniest of lasses.'

'Because they're raised in decency and obedience.'

'True, they even turn their cheeks to be slapped! The spitting image of their father! Aye, as the dam so the lamb, you spoke truth, and since I remember your carry-on with the lads when you were young, then it's no wonder to me that Jagusia has taken after you perfect, for she's the image of you. Any fool that wants, so long as the cap's afloat on his head ... she'll not refuse out o' sheer kindness,' Jagustynka hissed in her ear, until the other grew pale, bowing her head lower.

Jagna was just crossing the hallway. Hanka called to her, offering her vodka: she drank it and without looking at anyone went to her own side of the house.

The Voyt frowned, waiting in vain for her to return.

Conversation flagged and the Voyt sat listening out, his eyes following Jagna stealthily when she appeared again and went outside.

The women too lost their appetite for chatter, the two oldest glaring savagely at each other with furious eyes, while Ploszkowa conferred quietly with Hanka. Only Ambrozy did not let the bottle pass and nattered away, telling his tall tales, though no one was listening.

The Voyt suddenly rose and seemingly left for home, but went instead through the orchard to the farmyard. Jagusia was sitting on the threshold of the byre, giving the brindled bullock her finger to suck.

Looking about warily and pushing caramels into her bodice, he whispered:

'Here, Jaguś, come to the snug at dusk and I'll give you something better.'

And not waiting for a reply, he hurried back to the chamber.

'Ho, ho! You've got yourself a bullock – you'll sell him well,' he said, unbuttoning his capote.

'We'll keep it for breeding. It's good manor stock.'

'For a sure profit, given that the miller's bull is good for nothing now. Antek'll be pleased with such a beast.'

'My Jesus! When will he ever see it? When?' cried Hanka.

'Not too long. I say so, so you better believe it.'

'Why, everyone's waiting from day to day.'

'Any day now, I'm telling you. I've some knowledge of these matters, after all ...'

'But the fields won't wait, that's the worst of it.'

'It's a horror to think of the autumn if the sowing don't happen in time!'

A cart rumbled past. Józka looked out and said:

'The reverend and Rocho have driven by.'

'The priest was planning to get wine for Mass,' explained Ambrozy.

'And he's taken Rocho for advice, and not Dominikowa!' mocked Jagustynka.

Dominikowa did not manage to make a retort, for the blacksmith entered and the Voyt rose to hand him a glass.

'You're late, Michał, you've catching up to do!'

'I'll be snapping at your heels, my friend, as it seems you're wanted ...'

He'd barely finished speaking when the Soltys burst in, panting.

'Piotr, come on, the notary and gendarmes are waiting for you.'

'Son-of-bitch, not a prayer's worth of peace to be had! But what's to do, duty comes first ...'

'See to them quick and come back.'

'If there's time enough. It'll be the fire at Podlesie and your tunnel they'll want to investigate ...'

He dashed off with the Soltys. Hanka, fixing her eyes on the blacksmith, said:

'When they come round to make notes, you can tell them everything, Michał.'

He picked at his moustache and fixed his eyes on the child as though scrutinizing him.

'What can I tell them? No more than Józka!'

'Well, I'll not be sending a lass to talk to officials, it's not seemly. You can tell them that, as far as we know, they took nothing from the storeroom. If anything else has gone missing, well ... God alone knows of it ... and ...' She brushed the quilt, coughing, to disguise the mockery on her face, but he just shrugged and went out.

'That poxy villain!' She gave a curt laugh.

'Not only brief, but interrupted too!' Ambrozy complained of the christening, reaching for his cap.

'Józka, cut some sausage – let him carry on his party at home.'

'Am I a goose to be stuffed on dry sausage?'

'Water it with vodka, then, and stop complaining.'

'As the wise are wont to say: measure the groats when you tip 'em in the pan, but don't watch your fingers when you're working and don't count the glasses when you're feasting ...'

'Where devils ring the bells, a drunk serves at Mass!'

So they chatted, not begrudging the vodka, but not two prayers had gone by when the Soltys began rushing round the cottages, summoning everyone to the Voyt's to appear before the notary and gendarmes. This angered Ploszkowa. Standing arms akimbo, she gave him a mouthful:

'The Voyt can put his orders you know where ... under my shirt! Is it our business? Did we ask 'em? Do we have time for gendarmes, eh? We're not dogs to come running at any old whistle! If they want something, let 'em come and ask! That's the only way! We're not coming!' she yelled, running out on to the road to the group of timorous women who were gathering at the pond.

'To work, neighbours, to the fields. If someone's got business with a farmer's wife, he knows where to look. Ha, they'll have to wait, if they think we'll throw everything aside at any old command to go standing by the door like dogs, the fools!' she bellowed, thoroughly enraged.

She was the first farmer's wife after the Borynas, so they listened to her and scuttled off in all directions like frightened brood hens. As most folk had already been in the fields since morning, the village emptied, with only children playing here and there by the pond and the old folk warming themselves in the sun.

The notary was cross, of course, and cursed the Soltys mightily, but like it or not he had to wend his way to the fields ... They chased about the strips a long time, questioning folk about anything anyone knew of the fire at Podlesie. Everyone stuck to the same story, which the notary knew already, for who would reveal in front of the gendarmes what they were keeping to themselves?

All they did was waste time until noon, tired with clambering over rough terrain and filthy to the waist, since the fields in parts were still muddy, and all in vain.

So infuriated were they by this that by the time they reached Boryna's to draw up a statement regarding the tunnelling, the gendarme in charge was swearing for all he was worth and, running into Bylica on the porch, leapt at him with his fists and shouted:

'You, *mordo sobacha*, why aren't you keeping guard, letting thieves dig their way under your house, eh?' and began cursing him on the name of his mother.⁴

'Watch the guarding yourself, that's what you're here for. I'm not your hired hand, d'you hear!' the old man retorted immediately, cut to the quick.

The notary bellowed that he should shut his mouth, he was speaking to an official, and he'd find himself in the clink for his impertinence, but the old man was properly enraged. Drawing himself up, haughty and threatening, his eyes blazing, he declared hoarsely:

'And who do you think you are? You serve the people, it's the people pay you, so do what the Voyt has ordered of you, and hands off the farmers! Hark at him, the wastrel, the scribbler! Stuffed himself fat on our bread and now he's shoving folk about ... Your own masters'll punish you in turn, you'll see ...'

The Voyt and Soltys leapt at him to hush him, but his rage grew even greater and his trembling hands were searching now for some implement.

'Go ahead and write me a fine. I'll pay, and stand you a drink to boot, if I feel like it!' he cried.

They took no notice of him, recording everything in detail and questioning the inhabitants about the tunnel. Unable to calm down, the old man grumbled to himself, pacing round the house, peering into corners and even kicking the dog.

When they'd finished, they wanted a bite of something, but Hanka had told them to say that they were short of milk and bread just then; there were only the potatoes from breakfast.

They made for the inn, cursing Lipce like troopers.

'You did right, Hanuś, they'll not do anything to you. Jesus, even the late squire, though he had the right, never abused me like that, never ...'

Bylica could not forget the insult for a long time.

Right after noon, someone stepped in to say they were still sitting in the inn and the Soltys was asking that Kozłowa be fetched.

'Seek the wind in the field!' Jagustynka said with a laugh.

'She's probably run off to the forest for firewood,' added Hanka.

'She's been in Warsaw since yesterday, gone to the hospital for children. She's to bring two back tomorrow to raise – foundlings, they say ...'

'To starve 'em, like she did with the last lot two years ago.'

'Maybe that's better for the poor devils, then they won't spend their whole lives slaving like dogs ...'

'A bastard's human too ... She'll answer for it heavily before God.'

'She don't starve 'em on purpose. She barely ever eats her fill herself, so how will she find enough for bairns ...'

'They pay for their keep, she's not nursing 'em out o' kindness!' Hanka said grimly.

'Fifty each for a whole year, precious little help ...'

'Certainly not when she drinks it straight off and then the kids are dying of hunger.'

'Nay, not all. Didn't your Witek grow up there, and that other one, who's with a farmer at Modlica!'

'Because Father took Witek when he were just a scrap, still gripping his shirt between his teeth, and he grew up here. It were the same with that other one.'

'Am I defending Kozłowa? ... I'm only saying how it seems to me. The woman's got to earn a living somehow, for she's nothing to put in the pot.'

'Aye, Kozioł's not here, so there's no one to steal it.'

'She didn't manage with Agata. Instead of dying, the old woman got better and moved out. Now she complains about the village that every day Kozłowa berated her for taking her time at death's door on purpose.'

'She'll most likely go back to the Kłabs': where is she to find refuge?'

'She'll not: she's embittered with her kin. Kłębowa wasn't happy to see her go, for the old woman's taken her bedding and probably has quite some cash, but she didn't want to stay. She's taken her chest to the Soltys and is no doubt looking around for a peaceful spot to die.'

'She'll live a bit longer yet. She'll be useful in every cottage now, if just to mind the geese or check the cows. Where's that Jagna got to again?'

'At the organist's surely, sewing frills for the young lady.'

'Fine time for fripperies, as though there weren't work enough in the house!'

'She's forever there since Easter,' complained Józka.

'I'll sort her out so as she won't forget it ... Pass me the baby.'

Hanka took him and as soon as they'd cleared up after dinner, she hurried them all off to work. She remained alone in the chamber, listening out occasionally for the children, who were playing in front of the house under Bylica's eye, and on the other side Boryna lay alone as always, gazing at the sun that streamed in a fluttering ribbon from the window across the chamber. He rummaged in the light with his fingers, whispering quietly, like a child left to itself.

The village was deserted, for it was perfect weather and whoever could went out to the fields to work.

It had been fine since Easter, warmer and brighter every day. The days were lengthening, misty in the morning, greyish and gently warmed by noon, and flaming at sunset – true springtime days.

Some passed quiet as can be, like streams sparkling in the sunshine, cool and clear as water and rippling slightly at the edges, empty and bluish, with only a touch of yellow dandelion here and there, or whitened by daisies or flushed green by the drooping branches of the willows.

Other days rose warm already through and through, steamy, damp and sun-drenched, fragrant and fresh and bursting with growth, so swollen with springtime, so drunk with sap, that in the evening, when the birdsong had fallen silent and the village was settling down to sleep, the pressure of roots could almost be felt in the earth and the movement of shoots, the hushed murmur of buds opening, the thrust of new growth and the sound of creatures emerging into God's world ...

Then came yet other, quite different days.

Sunless, misty, grey-blue, low, heaped with pot-bellied clouds, humid and heavy, turning the head like vodka, so that people felt drunk. The trees seemed to shrink and tremble and all creation, driven by some strange craving, tossed and swayed, but whither or why, it was impossible to say, so that folk wanted to shout, to stretch or just roll in the wet grass, like crazy dogs.

Or then there were days that made the world feel as though wrapped in coarse yarn, when it rained from dawn onwards and nothing could be seen, neither roads, nor cottages huddled in soaking orchards. The rain fell slowly and steadily, constant and unrelenting, as though quivering grey threads were unwinding from some invisible spindle, tying heaven to earth, and everything simply leaned over patiently and grew wet, listening to the loud babble and gurgle of brooks, their white hair streaming and tumbling from the black fields.

It was the same every year in early springtime; no one gave it a second thought. It was not the time for deliberation: daybreak would prompt folk out to work, and late dusk would drive them back again, so that there was scarcely time to eat and rest a little.

Lipce stood abandoned for days on end as a result, under the watchful eye only of the elderly, dogs and the orchards that shielded the cottages in thick foliage. Sometimes an old beggar would trudge by, accompanied by yapping dogs, or a cart heading for the mill, and then the roads would lie empty again and the dumbstruck cottages with their scorched windowpanes would peep out on to the wide, immeasurable fields that surrounded the whole village like a sea – fields that, like a mother born, caressed their children on their lap and pressed them to their swollen, nurturing breast.

Thus days full of toil went by, in warmth and showers. Once a feathery snow began to fall, coating the fields grey, though briefly, for the sun soon devoured it – so it was no wonder that strife and quarrels and all other matters subsided, for work had them harnessed under a heavy yoke and kept all heads bent to the ground.

So every morning, as soon as dewy daybreak opened its ashen eyes and the first skylarks broke into song, the village got to its feet. There was hubbub, the slamming of gates, children wailing, the cries of geese driven out to the ditches, and soon they were leading out the horses, the boys were guiding the ploughs, loading potatoes on to the carts and leaving so quickly for the fields that within a prayer or two it was quiet in the village and deserted. Hardly anyone even went to Mass, so that the organ boomed in an empty church, spilling into the nearest fields, and not till the Angelus bell sounded did they kneel down in the fields for morning prayers.

Everyone went out to work, but there was hardly a sign of it on the land. Only a careful look would reveal a plough here and there, horses in harness, a cart on the baulks or women poking about like red caterpillars in the midst of huge fields under a bright high sky.

And all around, every village – Rudka, Wola, Modlica, the tips of whose orchards and white walls were visible in the bluish air – was alive with shouts and singing and the noise of work.

Wherever the eye reached beyond the boundary mounds, there you'd see peasants sowing, ploughs tilling, people planting potatoes, while on the sandy fields dust was already rising behind the harrows.

Only the Lipce lands lay in numb silence, sad, deserted, like barren wastes or clumps of trees withering in the midst of a young forest. For they lay abandoned, dear God, almost fallow, since the work of these women's hands could not make up for even ten peasants, even though the whole village laboured in sweat and toil from dawn until nightfall.

What could they manage on their own? They busied themselves with the potatoes and flax while the clamour of partridges rose ever more loudly over the rest of the fields, or a hare would loll up by, but so slowly they could count the number of times he flashed his tail over the winter wheat. The crows traipsed lazily about the fallow strips that stretched out in the sun, waiting in vain for human hands.

What good to folk were those perfect and marvellous days, what use their rising in the morning like golden monstres dipped in silver, that they were green, smelling of herbs, warm and filled with birdsong, that every ditch was gilded with dandelions, that every baulk shimmered like a ribbon embroidered with daisies and the floodplains were sprinkled with flowers like pink down, that every little tree brimmed with green, and the whole world surged with springtime such that the earth seemed to simmer and seethe!

What of it, when the fields were neither ploughed, nor sown, nor tilled, and the farmhands, though seemingly fit and strong, only lazed in the sun, wasting whole weeks on nothing. Meanwhile, in place of grain, charlock was abounding on the rich, fertile land, thistles shot up, goosefoot spread along the ditches, sorrel reddened, couch grass sprouted thick along the autumn-ploughed land, and slender mullein and burdock, like bosom pals, settled down everywhere in the stubble. What had once lurked secretly and in trepidation now burgeoned with abandon, forging from the furrows into the fields and running rampant over the land.

And a sense of dread began to drift over the desolate fields.

It seemed as though the woods, leaning low over the fallow land, were muttering together aghast, that streams wound their way more apprehensively across the emptiness, and the blackthorn already loaded with white buds, the pears along the baulks, birds passing overhead, some wanderer from distant parts and even the crosses and figures of saints guarding the roadsides – all looked about in bewilderment and asked the bright days and empty, idle lands:

'Where have the farmers gone? Where are the songs, the riotous glee, where?'

Only the women's weeping told them what had happened in Lipce.

And so day followed day with no change for the better. On the contrary, every day fewer women came out to the fields, since they could barely manage their work in the cottages.

Only at Boryna's did everything proceed as usual, slower than in other years, and not so well, since Pietrek was only just learning the work of the field, but go it did somehow, for there was no lack of hands to help.

Hanka, though still in bed, directed everything from there so cleverly and firmly that even Jagna had to get down to work with the others. She had an eye on everything: the livestock, the sick man, when to plough and when to sow, and the children too, as Bylica had not been coming since the christening. It seemed he had fallen ill. True, she spent whole days alone in bed, seeing the others only at dinnertime or in the evening, and Dominikowa looked in on her once a day. None of the neighbours showed their faces – not even Magda – and as for Rocho, all trace of him had

vanished: he'd not appeared again after leaving with the parish priest that time. She found it terribly tedious to be lying still. In order to grow well more quickly and gain strength, she did not deny herself fat or eggs, or meat, and even gave orders for a brood hen to be slaughtered to make broth – not a laying hen, to be sure, but still worth two zlotys.

So quickly did she thus regain her health that she was up by the second Sunday after Easter, and resolved to go and be churchied.⁶ The women tried to dissuade her, but she was adamant and went off with Ploszkowa right after the High Mass.

She was still unsteady on her feet and had to lean frequently on her friend.

'The scent of spring's that strong my head is spinning.'

'You'll get used to it in a day or two.'

'It's been only a week, and the world's changed enough for a month.'

'Spring rides a swift horse, you'll not overtake it.'

'Green too everywhere – my Jesus, so green!'

Indeed, the orchards seemed to hover over the earth like a cloud of greenery, with only the chimneys showing white above them and the tops of roofs. The birds chirped away in the thickets, and a warm wind blew from the fields, ruffling the weeds along the fences, and making the pond ripple and pucker.

'Fine buds on the cherries, they'll soon blossom ...'

'So long as the frost don't nip 'em, then the fruit'll be grand.'

'They say when bread's scarce there's fruit to spare!'

'That's the way things are heading in Lipce!' Hanka sighed sadly, looking tearfully at the unsown fields.

The churching was quickly done, for the child had started to wail. Hanka too felt so exhausted that she lay down on the bed right after returning to the chamber, but she had barely caught her breath when Witek flew in, shouting:

'Missus, Gypsies are heading for the village!'⁷

'Well there's a fine kettle of fish, that's all we need. Call Pietrek to close the gates so they don't make off with anything.'

She went outside, greatly alarmed.

Before long, a whole band of Gypsies was marauding about the village, ragged, dishevelled, black as cauldrons, children on their backs, and so insistent, God save us! They slouched about begging, wanting to tell fortunes, and pushing their way inside by force. There were about ten of them, and they made enough noise for the whole village.

'Józka, get the geese and chickens into the yard, and bring the children inside, before they steal 'em!'

Hanka sat on the porch to watch and, seeing some Gypsy woman heading to their homestead, she set the dog on her. Łapa was fired up and wouldn't let her go and the old witch threatened him with her stick and muttered something over him.

'Ha, you can put your curses you know where, you old thief!'

'She wouldn't have cursed us if you'd let her be,' said Jagna with irritation.

'She'd have stolen something instead. You cannot keep an eye on that kind, even when you're looking right at her hands. Go chase her if you're wanting your fortune told.'

Hanka had surely hit upon some hidden desire, for Jagna took off for the village and hung about the Gypsies all that Sunday afternoon. She could neither shake a vague fear of fortune-telling nor overcome her curiosity, so that a hundred times she turned back to the cottage and then went after them again, until dusk, when the Gypsies began to head for the forest. Jagna saw that one of them had entered the inn, so she slipped in after her and, terrified, crossing herself again and again, asked for her fortune to be told, ignoring the people standing at the bar.

That evening, after supper, the girls gathered on the porch at Józka's and were all abuzz with talk about the Gypsies, telling who'd had what fortune told: a wedding for Marysia Balcerkówna at digging time; for Nastka a great fortune and a peasant fellow; Ulisia Sochówna would have a visit from a bachelor; illness would strike that pudgy Weronka Bartkowa; and for Tereska the soldier's wife ...

'A bastard for sure!' grunted Jagustynka, sitting to one side.

They ignored her, for Pietrek had just joined them and began holding forth, telling them how the Gypsies had their own king who went about all in silver buttons, and enjoyed such authority that if he ordered one of them in jest to hang themselves, they'd do it in a flash.

'King of thieves, such a mighty man, and they set the dogs on him,' whispered Witek.

'Spawn of dogs, cursed heathens!' muttered the old woman and, moving closer, began to recount how Gypsies stole children from the villages.⁸

'And to make 'em black, they bathe 'em in a brew from alders, so their born mother won't recognize 'em, and they take a brick and rub down to the bone wherever the holy oils were applied at christening, and turn them straight into little devils.'

'Seems they know such charms and spells, it's a terror to speak of!' a girl squealed.

'True, a Gypsy woman need only breathe on you and whiskers'll grow on your elbow.'

'You can laugh! ... They say a man from the Slupsk parish set his dogs on 'em and a Gypsy woman flashed a little mirror in front of his eyes, and he went blind on the spot.'

'And I've heard they can turn people into anything, even animals.'

'Whoever drinks can best turn himself into a swine.'

'Ha, and that farmer from Modlica, who were at indulgences last year, didn't he crawl about on all fours and bark?'

'It was the devil possessed him. The priest chased the evil out of him.'

'Jesus, such things in the world, makes your skin crawl!'

'Evil lurks everywhere, like a wolf circling sheep.'

A shudder of alarm ran through them and they huddled closer. Witek, trembling with fright, whispered:

'Something's haunting our place ...'

'Don't talk rubbish, idiot!' Jagustynka contradicted him.

'Would I dare, when sommat walks round the stables, tips out the fodder, the horses whinny ... and then it goes behind the rick. I know, I've seen Łapa run there and growl, then he wags his tail and fawns, and there's no one there ... Must be Kuba's soul that comes ...' he added more quietly, looking round on all sides.

'Kuba's soul!' whispered Józka, crossing herself over and over.

They all shivered, a chill creeping through their bones, and when a door creaked, they leapt up with a scream. It was Hanka standing on the threshold.

'Pietrek, where are the Gypsies stopping?'

'They said in church that they were camped in the wood beyond the Boryna cross.'⁹

'We must watch in the night, so they don't make off with anything.'

'They don't steal from nearby, they say.'

'They do if they can. Two years ago they were stopping there and took Sosza's sow ... You can't depend on that!' warned Hanka. When the girls had all left, she made sure the boys closed up the barn and stable properly and, coming back, looked in on Boryna's side, to see if Jagusia was back yet.

'Józka, nip out for Jagna – she should come back home. I'm not leaving the door open all night tonight.'

But Józka quickly informed her that it was dark at Dominikowa's and almost all the village was asleep.

'I'll not let that gadabout in. She can sit outside all night!' she threatened, shooting the bolt. It must have been very late when she heard tugging at the door. She got up to open it and recoiled, such a strong smell of vodka exploded from Jagna. She must have been quite drunk, since she groped about for the latch for ages and you could hear her knocking against objects in her chamber and collapsing on to the bed just as she was.

'Well, I ...! She couldn't have got more down her if there'd been a fair, well, well!'

But the night was not fated to pass peacefully, for at the crack of dawn such shouting and lamenting roused the village that whoever was still sleeping ran hurriedly out on to the road in their nightshirt, wondering if there was a fire ...

It was Balcerkowa and her daughters bawling to high heaven that the thieves had taken her horse. In a flash, the whole village descended on the cottage where the dishevelled women, weeping and wailing deliriously, recounted how Marysia had gone to feed the livestock at daybreak and found the doors were open and the stable empty and no horse at the manger.

'Help, merciful Jesus! Help us, people, help!' wailed the old woman, clutching her head and throwing herself against the fence like a trammelled bird.

The Soltys ran up. They'd sent for the Voyt too, but he was not at home, and appeared only a few prayers later, except that he could barely stand on his feet: he was so drunk, sleepy and quite senseless, for he kept muttering and chasing people away until the Soltys had to remove him from sight. But hardly anyone paid him any attention in the midst of this heavy affliction that had fallen upon all souls like a stone. They listened to the tale over and again, trudging from stable to road and back, not knowing where to begin, helpless and shaken to the core, until one woman called out:

'This is Gypsies' doing!'

'True, they've set up camp in the wood! They must have got in yesterday!'

'Can't be anyone else, no!'

Indignant voices rose.

'Get over there and get it back, and give the thieves a thrashing!' yelled Gulbasowa.

'Finish 'em off for that!'

All bedlam broke loose as the sun began to rise. They were tearing up fence posts, shaking their fists, running about in circles or rushing ahead already with a cry, when a new upset emerged. The Soltys's wife came running in tears to announce that the cart had been stolen from their yard.

They froze as though a thunderbolt had struck close by, so that for a long moment they could only gasp and spread their arms, looking at each other in dismay.

'They took a cart with a horse – well, that's never happened in the village before.'

'Some punishment has fallen upon Lipce.'

'And worse with every week!'

'More's happened in a month than in whole years at a time before!'

'But where will it end, where!'

They whispered fearfully among themselves.

They all rushed at once after the Soltys to the Balcereks' orchard where hoof prints could be clearly seen on the fresh dewy ground, leading all the way to the Soltys's barn, where the thieves had harnessed the horse to the cart and, circling the fields, had driven out by the miller's, on to the Wola road.

Half the village went off in silence to examine the tracks, which stopped all of a sudden by the burnt ricks, at the turn to Podlesie, so it was impossible to follow them further.

But this theft had so shaken them all that, though it was a wondrous day, hardly anyone took up their work. They wandered about disconsolate, wringing their hands, commiserating with Balcerkowa, and gripped with an ever-greater terror for their own property.

Balcerkowa, meanwhile, sat by her stable as though before a catafalque. Puffy with tears and barely gasping, she exclaimed occasionally amid her moans:

'Oh, my one and only chestnut, my darling horse, my best farmhand! He were barely approaching his tenth year, I'd raised him myself from a foal like my own child. Why, he were born the same year as my Stacho! What will we poor wretches do without you now, what?'

On she lamented so pitifully that the more soft-hearted wept with her, grieving over her loss, for to be without a horse was like being without hands, particularly now in springtime and when there were no men. Aye, all her neighbours sat around, comforting her with all their heart, together reminiscing about the chestnut and singing his praises.

'A beautiful horse he was, still strong, and gentle as a child.'

'He kicked my boy, m'dear, but true he were a top gelding.'

'True, his legs were swelling and he were a bit blind, but you'd get forty notes for him for sure.'

'And he frolicked like a dog. Didn't he pull the quilts off the fences? Eh?'

'Find another one like that, just try!'

They gave vent to their aching sorrow, as though over a dead man, and every time Balcerkowa glanced at the manger, she howled afresh and new woes clutched at her throat, while the empty stall, like a fresh-dug grave, jogged the memory of her loss and the injury done her. She only calmed down when told that the Soltys had taken Hanka's Pietrek, the priest's Walek and the miller's boy, and had gone off to hunt for the Gypsies.

'Ha, find the wind in the field. He who steals knows how to hide his spoils.'

Evening had set in by the time they returned with the news that there wasn't a trace of them, as if they'd been tossed like a stone into water.

The Voyt too showed up in the village and though darkness was falling he took the Soltys in the brichka and they drove off to report to the magistracy and gendarmes. Balcerkowa and Marysia went off to the neighbouring villages to search on their own account.

But they returned with nothing but the news that thefts had multiplied in other villages too. An even greater distress beset the people, in fear for their property, so that the Voyt appointed watchmen. Lacking farmhands, every night two women with the older boys were to patrol the village and watch, and furthermore every cottage was to watch separately while all the girls would sleep in the stables and byres.

But even this didn't help and their fears multiplied, for despite the watch, the very first night at Filipka's beyond the water the thieves made off with her sow, about to farrow.

It can hardly be recounted how that poor skinny woman carried on. She could not have grieved more over a child, for it was her only possession, on which she was counting in order to survive until harvest. It was a horror to behold how she howled and beat her head against the walls. She even went running off to the priest with her laments, so that he gave her a whole rouble for pity's sake and promised her a piglet from the ones that were not due until harvest.

Folk hardly knew what to do now and how to prevent the thefts. A truly funeral day began, for even the weather had changed. The rain had poured since daybreak and the whole world seemed crushed under a heavy grey sky. Sunk in sadness, people went about distressed, abject and sighing, thinking fearfully of the night ahead.

Fortunately, just before evening Rocho arrived and rushed about the houses with news so strange, it was almost unbelievable. Lo and behold, he joyfully announced that on Thursday, the day after tomorrow, their neighbours would descend upon Lipce in a body to help folk in the fields.

They could not believe it at first, but when the priest, who had come into the village, solemnly confirmed it, such joy erupted among the people that at dusk, when the rain had stopped and the puddles glowed red in the setting sun as it slipped into the haze, the roads were swarming with folk and ringing with merry shouts. Every cottage was buzzing, neighbours rushed about discussing the news in amazement, forgetting completely about the thefts in such heartfelt rejoicing at this unexpected assistance that hardly anyone kept watch that night.

At day-peep next morning, the whole village was up. They tidied their houses and began to bake bread, prepare their carts, cut potatoes for planting and go off to the fields to spread the muck that was lying in heaps. In some cottages they bustled over food and drink for these unexpected guests, for, as self-respecting farming folk, they understood the seemly and proper way to receive them, hence many a chicken or goose kept back for market gave up its neck to the knife, and plenty was taken on credit at both the inn and the mill, like preparations before a great holiday.

And Rocho, perhaps the most joyful and moved of all, spent the day darting about the village here and there, urging them to prepare, and was so radiant and surprisingly talkative that when he looked in at Boryna's, Hanka, who was lying down again, feeling ill, said quietly:

'Your eyes are shining as though you were sick ...'

'I'm well, only pleased as never in my life. Don't you see: so many men will arrive in Lipce tomorrow for a whole two days that all the most urgent work will be done. How am I not to be pleased?'

'I just find it strange that they'll do it for nothing, with no pay, for thanks alone ... That's never happened ...'

'For thanks alone, as righteous Poles and Christians should! Aye, true it's unknown and that's why evil reigns in the world. Things will change for the better, you'll see! Folk will come to their senses and mark that there is no point looking about, that no one will help but you yourselves, helping each other in need! And it will spread over all lands like an immeasurable forest and enemies will disappear like snow! That time will come, you'll see!' he cried, radiant, and stretched out his hands, as though he wished to embrace all nations and bind them together in love in a single unbreakable bale.

But he made off quickly when she began to ask who had brought about this miracle that they were coming. He walked about the village, since lights shone in the cottages until late at night for the girls were preparing their best dresses, expecting some lads to come too the following day.

The next day, dawn had barely blanched the rooftops and the village was ready. Smoke was rising from the chimneys, the girls were running between the cottages as though they'd been scalded and the boys scrambled up ladders on to the roof ridges to watch the roads. A festive hush fell over the village. A cloudy day dawned, sunless, but warm and strangely languid. While the birds chirped vociferously in the orchards, people's voices grew quiet and heavy in the warm damp air.

They waited a long time, for it was not until after the bells for Mass that a dull thud started along the roads and a line of carts began to roll from under the thin blue mist.

'They're coming from Wola!'

'From Rzepki!'

'From Dębica!'

'From Przylęk!'

There were shouts on every side as they ran ahead to the church when the first carts arrived, and soon the whole square was packed with people and teams of horses. The men, dressed in their best, jumped down from the carts, greeting the women approaching on every side, while the children raised their usual hubbub, swarming around the new arrivals.

They went straight into Mass, for the organ was booming.

And when the priest had finished, almost the whole village had poured out behind the graveyard gates under the bell tower. The women of the house stepped out ahead, the girls hovering at the sides, staring at the farmhands, while the hired hands huddled in a separate group like partridges, not daring to push forward under the eyes of the priest, who suddenly appeared, greeted everyone and, together with Rocho, began to decree who was to go to which cottage to work, taking care only that the wealthier should lodge with their ilk.

He arranged everything with such speed that in less than half an hour the men were apportioned, and only the weeping Lipce hired hands were left before the church, waiting in vain for someone to fall to their lot. In the village there was great commotion; they put benches out before the houses, quickly serving breakfast and offering vodka to toast their better acquaintance. The girls served willingly, barely touching the food, since the majority were young men and dressed up as though they'd come not to labour but for a betrothal.

There was little time for chatter. The men simply told their names and which village they'd come from. They even ate but little, politely making their excuses, since they'd not yet earned a heartier meal. Under the women's guidance, they quickly began to leave for the fields.

It was like a solemn feast day.

The empty torpid fields revived, voices rang out, carts came rolling from every yard, ploughs were pulled along every path. There were folk on the move on every baulk, and everywhere across the orchards and fields shouts rang out, joyful greetings flew, horses neighed, dry wheels rattled, the dogs barked vehemently as they chased after the colts, and a buoyant, powerful joy filled every heart and spread over the land. Along the potato patches, the barley field, the stubble and the weed-ridden fallow land, folk stood amid the merry din, as loud and noisy as at a dance.

All at once everything quietened, whips whistled, whippetrees clattered, horses tensed and the still-rusty ploughs began slowly to press into the earth and push aside the first black shining clods. Folk straightened, took a breath and crossed themselves, casting their eyes about the fields before bending to the work in hand.

An utterly pious and holy hush settled over the fields, as though a service had begun in a vast church. Folk bent humbly over the fields. They scattered the sacred, fertile seed in silence and with heartfelt sighs, sowing their toil for a fruitful tomorrow, entrusting themselves completely to Mother Earth.

Hej! The Lipce fields revived once more. They had waited longingly for their masters, and far, as far as the eye could see, on all the lands, from the shadow of the woods to the upper boundaries of the fields, everywhere in this grey-green misty air, as though underwater, teemed with red woollen skirts, striped trousers, white capotes, horses bent to the plough and carts along the baulks.

It was as though a swarm of bees had settled industriously on the fragrant earth in the quiet of the pale spring day, disturbed only by the skylarks singing loudly as they hovered out of sight. A gust blew from time to time, tugging the low trees, ruffling the women's clothing and flattening the rye before running away to the woods with a chuckle.

They worked long hours without respite, pausing only to straighten their backs or catch their breath before bending again to the ground. Even at midday, they did not leave the fields, but sat themselves down on the baulk to eat from double pots and ease their bones, but as soon as the horses had eaten, they seized the plough, neither lazing nor lingering. Not until dusk fell did they begin to trudge back from the fields.

Then all the cottages lit up in a flurry of bustle and chatter. The glow of fires seemed to burst on to the road from every open door and window. In every cottage they bustled about the chores and supper. A hubbub arose – shouts, horses neighing, gates creaking, calves bleating, the honking of geese rounded up for the night into the yards, children's cries – so that the whole village resounded and shook in this strangely joyful uproar.

It finally quietened when the women of the house invited them to eat, so honouring the men that they seated them in the first place, pushing forward what was best, begrudging neither meat nor vodka ...

In all the cottages they were eating supper. Through open doors and windows everywhere, heads were visible as people gathered in a circle, jaws working, spoons scraping. The smell of frying pork fat drifted along the roads fit to make your nostrils twitch.

Only Rocho did not sit still anywhere for long. He went from house to house, sowing a kind word here, giving counsel there before going on to the next, like a solicitous landlord mindful of all equally, and, like the whole village, full of cheer and perhaps more overjoyed than anyone.

The little holiday was felt even at Hanka's, for though she did not need the help, to ease the burden for others she had invited two of the Rzepki men to stay who were working for Weronka and Golebowa.

She had chosen those from Rzepki that held themselves to be gentry.

Aye, in Lipce they'd always mocked that sort of gentry and held them in scorn, worse than city rogues and professionalists, but as soon as they came into the cottage, Hanka saw straight off that they were clearly different.

The men were slight and on the skinny side, dressed in the city way in black capotes, but with mightily expressive faces. Their moustaches jutted out like bundles of hemp and they rolled their eyes upwards, but they were talkative, with nice manners, and spoke like gentlemen. Very proper folk they were, and praised everything so politely, and flattered so pleasingly, that the women fair swelled with contentment.

Hanka had ordered a more ample supper too, served at a table spread with a clean cloth.

She observed them closely, directing everything with great care so that they practically tiptoed around them, trying to guess their needs. Jagna, meanwhile, as though she'd completely lost her head, dressed up like it was Shrovetide and sat staring at the younger one as at a picture.

'He's got his own manor girls, he won't glance at one in bare feet,'¹⁰ whispered Jagustynka, so that Jagna flushed and ran away to her own side of the house.

Rocho came in just then, looking round for a stool.

'Our men will be most surprised that people from Rzepki have come to help Lipce!' he said quietly.

'The fight in the woods was not over business of ours, so none of us harbours a grudge,' replied the elder of the Rzepki men.

'When two go head-to-head, a third always benefits!'

'True, Rocho, but let two come to a peaceable agreement in friendship, then the third might get it roundly on the head – eh?'

'You speak wisely, Pan Rzepecki, wisely ...'¹¹

'And what ails Lipce today, tomorrow could afflict Rzepki.'

'And every village, Pan Rzepecki, where instead of sticking together and defending one another, they quarrel, and through division and anger give themselves up to the foe. Wise and amicable neighbours are like fences and defensive walls: a pig will not squeeze through and lay waste to the field ...'

'We know this already, Rocho, among ourselves, but the peasants do not yet mark it and hence comes the tragedy of it ...'

'The time is coming for that too, Pan Rzepecki. They grow wiser ...'

Soon after supper they went out on the porch, where Pietrek was already playing the fiddle for the girls who had gathered to listen.

A quiet warm evening approached. The mists in their white sheepskins settled on the plains, lapwings warbled from the wetlands, the mill rumbled its own tune, and now and then the wind murmured in the trees. The sky was high, but banked with dun clouds, so that the young moon's rays slipped through along their fringes and from deep craters like wells the stars shone sharply.

The village buzzed like a hive about to swarm. All the windows shone until late, and until late did muffled whispers and merry laughter erupt along the fences or in the road. The lasses grinned at the young men and happily led them about the pond. The older ones, meanwhile, sat with their hosts on the thresholds, chatting in a dignified manner, enjoying the cool and rest.

And the next day, barely had dawn blushed in the heavens than in the earthbound greyness of daybreak they began to rise from sleep and get ready for work.

The sun rose beautifully and the world was brushed in silver hoar frost, all aflame, sparkling in the cool and bracing damp of early morning. The birds burst into a great cry, the trees rustled, water plashed, human voices rose, and the clatter, calls, and bellows, the trill of girls' singing here and there, and the whole hubbub and commotion of those setting out for work, were carried along on the breeze as it shook the bushes.

On the lowlands, the mists were still lying white as snow, though thinning out on the higher arable fields, where, sliced and driven off by whips of sunlight, they rose like incense from thuribles and soared towards the pure sky in jagged threads. Covered in rime, the fields still lay hunched in slumber and swollen like buds. From all sides, folk slowly pressed on to the dew-laden, drowsy strips, sinking into the sun-soaked mists and cleaving to the land in silence, for from the earth, the trees, the blue-grey distances, the sparkling winding brooks, from the mists and from the sky, bearing the hot disc of the sun, spring poured out upon the whole world with such force and elation that it tore open the heart and souls were transported with that holiest of joys, expressed only in the quiet shedding of tears or sighs or by kneeling at the sight of this springtime miracle, visible in even the lowliest blade of grass.

Long did that band of folk gaze about them, crossing themselves piously and whispering prayers before getting down to work in silence, so that by the time the bells rang for Mass, everyone was in their place.

The mists quickly unfurled and the fields stood sunny and bright, so that the eye reached right over the Lipce lands, cut across by green strips of winter wheat. Everywhere woollen skirts glowed red, ploughs tilled and harrows trailed. Led by the girls, rows of women fumbled as they planted potatoes, and one after another, down the long dark strips, walked the men, girded with cloths. Leaning a little and with a swift solemn sweep of the hand, they sowed the grain into the well-hoed and expectant land ...

So zealously were they all working, not even lifting their heads, that they did not notice the priest, who had appeared right after Mass and stood by his own farmhand, ploughing alongside the road. Then, to their astonishment, he walked about the strips, greeting people cheerfully, offering snuff and cigarettes to some as he went. Here he said a kind word, there he stroked a child's head and joked with the girls, and elsewhere, meanwhile, where a flock of sparrows fell upon the sown rye, he chased them off with a clod, and he often blessed the first handful of grain with the sign of the cross or sowed it himself. Everywhere he hurried them along, so that not even a steward could have managed it better.¹²

After dinner, he got down to work along with everyone else, explaining to the women that, although today was the feast of St Mark, the day's procession would not take place until the octave, on the third of May.¹³

'Today is not the time, it would be a shame to waste it, since the men won't come to help a second time!' he explained and he himself did not leave the fields until the very end. Hitching up his cassock and leaning on his stick, since he had a portly belly to hoist, he went about tirelessly, pausing only occasionally to sit on the baulks, to wipe the sweat from his bald head and catch his breath.

They were sincerely glad of it, for under his eye the work went more quickly and easily. The men counted it an honour that the priest himself was steward.

The sun was hanging full and red above the woods, the ground had darkened and was turning blue when, having finished the most urgent work, the men began to trail back to the village, hurrying home while it was still light enough to see.

Several did not stay for supper, taking a quick bite only, while others hurriedly accepted the bowls already prepared. The horses, ready and harnessed to the carts, neighed as they waited before the houses.

The priest again appeared in the village together with Rocho, dropping in at every house and thanking each man once more for his kind assistance to the folk of Lipce.

'For what you give to one in need is as though you give to Jesus himself! Well, I say to you, though you're not quick to give for a Mass, though you do not remember the needs of the church, though I've been saying for a year that the roof of the presbytery is leaking, I will pray for you every day for the kind-heartedness you have shown to Lipce,' he cried, shedding tears and kissing the heads bowing before him as he passed by.

They were just by the blacksmith's, turning to the other side of the village, when their path was blocked by the weeping hired hands with Kozłowa at their head.

'Beg pardon, Father, but we've come to ask: will the men not come to help us?' she began boldly, her voice raised.

'For waiting we were, that our turn would come, and they're leaving already ...'

'And we poor wretches are left with no help ...' they said together.

Embarrassed, the priest flushed deeply.

'What can I say? ... There were not enough for all ... Even so, they kindly helped a whole two days ... Well, I say ...' he babbled, his eyes darting over them.

'Aye! They helped all right, but only the farmers, the rich ones ...' sobbed Filipka.

'No one had a care for us, like we're plague-stricken ...'

'No one's head'll ache over us waifs ...'

'If only a bit o' ploughing for the potatoes, not even that!' they whispered tearfully.

'My dears ... they are leaving already ... well ... we'll manage somehow ... True, it's hard for you too ... and your men are with the others ... Well, I say, it'll be managed somehow.'

'And how long'll we wait for that somehow? ... If the potatoes don't go in, then there's nothing for it but to seek a rope!' wailed Gulbas's wife.

'I tell you, it'll be managed ... I'll give my horses, for a whole day even, though don't you wear them out ... I'll ask the miller too, and the Voyt, Boryna – maybe they'll help ...'

'Maybe! Wait away and pigs'll fly! Come on, you women, don't stand here whining for nothing! ... If you had no needs, the priest'd help ... For the farmers there is everything, and you, poor beggar, chew on stones and sip your own tears! The shepherd cares for the sheep that he can shear, but fleas are the only pickings he'll get from us!' Kozłowa railed, until the priest blocked his ears and left.

They huddled in a little group in floods of tears, complaining loudly. Rocho comforted them as best he could, promising kindly to wheedle some help for them. He led them to one side by a fence, for in every direction the others were departing now and the roads were dark with horses and people. Carts rumbled and warm words of thanks flew from every threshold:

'May God reward you!'

'Stay well!'

'We will repay you in good time!'

'And always come to visit us on Sunday, as if to your own kin!'

'Greetings to your fathers! And bring your wives to see us!'

'If any should find themselves in need, we'll help with all our hearts!'

'Go with God and may you prosper, dear friends!'

They each shouted, waving their caps and their hands in farewell.

Walking beside the carts, the girls and children accompanied them out of the village. The poplar road was the most crowded as men from three of the villages had come that way. As the carts rumbled slowly, they chatted merrily, joking and constantly erupting with laughter.

Darkness was descending, the sunset was fading. Only the waters still blazed red here and there, and mists began to curl across the lowlands as the hush of a springtime evening crept over the countryside. Somewhere in the distance, the frogs began to croak in unison ...

They went as far as the crossroads and there they said goodbye, among much laughter and calling, but just as the horses were moving off, one of the girls sang after them:

'The banns, O Jasio, won't you pay!

Father's cart is on its way,

Rattling over the bridge,

Da dana!

Rattling over the bridge!'

And the boys, turning in the carts, sang back:

'Marysia, there's an icy breeze,

Our matchmakers would surely freeze;

I'll do it at the Fast ...

Da dana!

I'll do it at the Fast!'

Their youthful voices rang out merrily over the dew and echoed into the whole wide world.

CHAPTER 7

'The men are returning!'

The news struck like a thunderbolt and ran through Lipce like wildfire!

Was it true? And when? How?

No one knew.

One thing was certain, that the commune lackey, who had pelted to the Voyt's with some letter before dawn, had told Kłębowa, who was just then taking her geese to the pond. In a flash, she flew to her neighbours with the news, whereupon the Balcererek women shouted it over to the nearest cottages, and in less than a Hail Mary all of Lipce had leapt to its feet, exclaiming joyfully until the cottages were fair seething with the uproar.

And it was still early. Dawn had barely emerged and a fine May day was just rising, except that it was oddly dark and wet. The rain drizzled as though through a fine sieve and splashed quietly on to the blossoming orchards.

'The men are coming back! The men are coming back!' The shout ripped through the whole village. Flying noisily through the orchards, it pealed in every cottage like a glad bell, bursting into flame in every heart and clamouring from every throat.

The day had barely risen, and the village was in ferment as on a market day. The children were running out on to the road with loud yelps, doors were slamming and women were getting dressed on the thresholds as they peered longingly through the budding trees and despite the bad weather blotting out the distance.

'They're all coming back! Farmers, farmhands, lads, all of them! They're on their way! They've just come out of the forest, they're on the poplar road already!' they each called in turn. There were shouts at every doorstep, and the more impassioned ran out like madwomen; already the sound of weeping had risen and the drumming of feet running ahead ...

The slapping of clogs and mud flying was all you could hear as they tore beyond the church on to the poplar road. But only puddles stood on the long, rainy lanes – dull and grey in deep-set ruts. Not a living soul looked out from under the poplars, black in the wet.

Though sorely disappointed, they pelted straight away to the other end of the village, beyond the mill, to the road from Wola, for the men could have taken that route.

But what next, when that way too was empty! The rain came down, obscuring the broad and dusty, bumpy highway in a grey cloud. Loamy water tumbled along the ditches and stormed in furrows, foaming streams scouring the road, and the blossoming briars edging the greenish fields kept their frozen flowers tightly curled.

'The crows are circling overhead, the blizzard'll pass!' one woman cried, peering in vain.

They went a little further, since they had spotted someone approaching along the road from the burnt-down grange.

It was the blind old man known to everyone. The dog leading him on a string barked fiercely and strained towards them. The blind man was listening out warily, his stick ready in defence, but on hearing the conversation, he quietened the dog and, praising God, said cheerfully:

'Lipce folk, I'm guessing ... eh? And lots of 'em ...'

The girls mobbed him, each one talking over the next.

'Set upon by magpies and all of 'em screeching at once!' he muttered, listening carefully on all sides, since they were pressing close.

They returned in a band, the old man plodding in the middle, swinging on his crutches and twisted legs, his great, blind face leaning out.

A white film clouded his eyes, while his cheeks were red and fat and his brows grew grey and bushy. He had a nose like a trumpet and a considerably bloated belly.

He listened patiently, and grasping the gist, he interrupted their tittle-tattle.

'I was hurrying with just that news to the village. A Jew was telling me in secret that the Lipce men were on their way back today from the jail! Yesterday he told me, and I thought to myself, tomorrow I'll head off and let 'em know first thing. Besides, Lipce's a grand place to visit! Who's treading beside me? I cannot tell by voice alone?'

'Marysia Balcerkówna! ... Nastka from the Gołąbs! ... The Soltys's Ułisia ... Kasia Kłębowa! ... Hanusia Sikorzanka!' they each started to call out.

'Ho, ho! The best of the bunch has come out! Seems you were keen to see the lads, and you must be satisfied with an old beggar! ... Eh?'

'Not true! We came out to meet our fathers!' they yelled.

'Heavens above, I'm blind, not deaf!' He pulled his sheepskin cap down more tightly.

'They said in the village they were coming already, so we ran out to meet them!'

'And there's no one here!'

'It's too early yet. It would be good if the farmers got here by noon, while the boys might not arrive till evening ...'

'Surely they'll let 'em out together so'll they'll get back together!'

'Maybe they'll have a bit o' fun in town? Are they short of young ladies there? ... Are they not free that they've got to rush back to you? ... He, he!' he teased them, laughing.

'Let 'em have fun! No one's crying after them!'

'Aye, there's no lack of that sort in town who've gone off to be wet-nurses or to light stoves for the Jews ... That kind'll be glad of 'em,' Nastusia whispered darkly.

'If they prefer town gadabouts, they're not the men for us!'

'Has it been long, Granddad, since you were in Lipce last?' one of them asked.

'A long time – back in autumn! I spent the winter with kindly folk. At a manor I stayed, through the hard times.'

'Maybe at Wola? At ours? Eh?'

'Wola, aye! I am no stranger to the squires and the manor dogs: they know me and never hurt me! They gave me a warm place by the stove, as much food as I could eat. I wound straw ropes the whole time and praised God. Made myself at home and the doggy too filled his belly pretty well! Ho, ho! The squire's wise: he stays friendly with beggars and knows he'll get a pouch and fleas for free ... he, he!' Prattling away, he chuckled and blinked till his belly shook with laughter.

'And when the Lord Jesus granted us springtime, I grew tired of fancy rooms and manor cajolery. I longed for cottages and this wide world ... Hey, the rain's showering lush as pure gold, makes the world smell of young grass ... Where you running off to? Girls?'

He suddenly realized they'd gone, leaving him by the mill.

'Girls!'

But no one replied: they'd spotted the women heading along by the pond towards the Voyt's house and scooted after them.

Half the village had gathered there already, to find out something definite.

The Voyt was clearly not long up, for he was sitting in his breeches on the doorstep, binding his footwraps¹ and calling to his wife for his shoes.

Breathless, muddy, still unwashed and unbrushed, and all fair gasping with impatience, they fell upon him with shouts.

He let them talk as he pulled on his newly greased boots and washed in the hallway. Combing his mop of hair in the open window, he sallied mockingly:

'Keen for your men, eh? Don't you worry, they'll be back today for sure. Mother, pass me the letter the sentry brought ... behind the picture.'

He turned it over in his hands, until flipping it with his fingers he said:

'Here it is, clear as day ... "Insofar as the Christians of the village of Lipce, commune of Tymów, county of ..." Here – read it for yourselves! The Voyt is telling you they're coming, so it's true!'

He tossed them the letter, which passed from hand to hand, and though none of them could make out a single word, given that it was official,² they latched on to it, staring at it with anxious joy, transfixed, until it reached Hanka, who, taking it with her apron over her hand, gave it back.

'Are they all coming back, my friend?' she asked timidly.

'It says they're coming, so they're coming!'

'They took the whole village together, so they'll release 'em together!' someone piped up.

'Come in, my dear, you're wet through!' said the Voyt's wife, but Hanka declined. Pulling her apron over her head, she was first to turn back.

But she walked slowly, barely breathing for joy and fear at once.

'Of course, they'll let Antek go, of course!' she thought, leaning suddenly on the fence, with such a cramp in the pit of her stomach that she almost fell. With feverish lips she struggled to catch her breath ... No, she still wasn't well, strangely weak. 'Antek will be back, he'll be back!' she wanted to shout, bursting with joy, and at the same time came a trickle of fear, uncertainty and deep disquiet.

She went more slowly, heavily, keeping to the fences, for the road was full of women dashing past with laughter and loud shouts. Glowing with gladness and oblivious to the dank weather, they gathered by the cottages or by the pond and chattered away vociferously.

Jagustynka caught up with them.

'Aye, so you know! Well, there's a piece of news. Every day we waited for it, and when it came it knocked me like a stick in the dark. Are you coming from the Voyt's?'

'He confirmed it and even read from a letter.'

'If he read it, then aye, must be right! Glory to you, Lord – the poor beggars will be back, the farmers'll be back!' she whispered earnestly, spreading her hands.

The tears trickled from her faded eyes, so that even Hanka was surprised.

'And there's me thinking you'd be cursing, but you're bleating, well, well!'

'You what?! Cursing at a time like this? A body's free of tongue at times out o' misery, but there's something else deep in the heart, so like it or not, you must rejoice and grieve with others ...'

You cannot live separate, no ...'

They were going past the forge: hammers were beating noisily, red flames erupting from the furnace, and the blacksmith was pulling a hoop on to a wheel by the wall. Seeing Hanka, he straightened and stared at her feverish face.

'Well? ... Here's the feast day Lipce's been waiting for! ... Seems some are coming back.'

'They're all coming, the Voyt read it out!' Jagustynka corrected him.

'All, eh. They don't let thugs out so quick, no ...'

Hanka's head spun and it was a wonder her heart didn't burst with the pain, but she withstood the blow and, walking away, said with implacable hatred:

'May your dog's tongue cleave to your palate!'

She hastened her steps, escaping his laughter, which sank into her heart like fangs.

She did not turn round till she reached the porch.

'Nothing but drizzle ... it'll be hard to get out on the field with the plough.' She feigned calmness.

'Morning rain and an old woman's dancing never last long,' said Jagustynka.

'Meantime, we need to mattock in the americans.'³

'No sign of the women. The news has made 'em late, but they'll come ... I was round in the evening: they all promised to come do their work in kind.'

The fire was cracking already in the room; it was warm and brighter than outside. Józka was scraping the potatoes and the baby was yelling at the top of his lungs, despite the older children distracting him. Hanka knelt at the cradle and began to nurse him.

'Józka, tell Pietrek to fix the planks. He can cart the dung from Florka's to the strips near the Pacześes' rye. He'll manage a few cartloads before the bluster stops ... why should he be hanging about!'

'No one makes a friend of idleness with you around.'

'I don't spare myself neither!' She got up, putting her breast away.

'Ha, it went clean out of my mind – why, it's a feast day from noon! The priest announced the procession, put off from St Mark's to the octave ...'

'But only Rogation Days have processions!'

'He said today from the pulpit, so it must be. You don't need a Rogation Day to walk to the statues and bless the boundaries.'⁴

'Ha, you boys are going to get a thrashing at the boundaries today!'⁵ said Józka, laughing, to Witek, who was just coming in.

'They're coming, the women, they're coming. Run along with 'em and sort what's needed. I'll stay back and tidy up and cook breakfast. Józka and Witek will carry the potatoes out into the fields!' Hanka ordered, peering across at the hired hands. Wound in shawls and aprons so that their eyes were barely visible, with baskets on their arms and carrying hoes, they were gathering by the wall, slapping their clogs against the earth bench.

Jagustynka led them across the stile on to the field path, to the drenched black strips right by the hayrick, where they soon set to work, two to a strip, heads facing each other. Picking holes with their mattocks, they pushed in a potato and heaped it with earth, digging over the adjoining rows at the same time.

There were four of them at work, the old woman being roped in just to urge them along.

But what difference did it make when the work went so poorly! ... Their hands were numb with cold and it was wet in the furrows, the water collecting in their clogs, and their clothes were completely spattered in mud, for the rain, though warm and increasingly fine, drizzled constantly, spraying over the ridges and spattering the orchards, which lowered flower-laden branches over the road, submitting almost with pleasure to the showers.

Yet a change was in the air: cockerels crowed, the sky was clearing at the edges, the swallows began to scout, flitting through the air, and the crows left the ridgepoles and flew, quiet and low, over the fields.

The women groped in the earth as they bent over the strips, like bundles of drenched rags, chatting and working slowly, with long pauses, since it was their work in kind, until Jagustynka, who was planting beans between the potato rows, looked around and said:

'Not many women out in the field today or the gardens.'

'The men are coming back, so it's not work they've got on their minds!'

'Of course, preparing rich dishes and warming their quilts ...'

'You laugh, but your own legs are trembling at the thought!' declared Kozłowa.

'I don't deny it. Lipce has grown tedious without the men. I'm old after all, so I'll say it straight: they're swine, scoundrels, louts and ruffians, but even if the biggest oaf appears, it's at once more lively and merry and the world an easier place. If someone says different, they're lying like a dog.'

'The women have been watching for them like hawks for rain!' said one woman with a sigh.

'Many a one will pay heavily for that waiting, and the lasses first ...'

'Give it three seasons and the reverend'll be hard pressed to keep up with the christenings ...'

'An old woman and talking such nonsense: why that's what the Lord Jesus created women for! It's no sin to have a child,' wry-faced Grzela's wife objected.

'And you've always got to have your say: always standing by bastards!'

'Always. To my dying day, I'll say it to anyone's face: still a human being, bastard or not, with a right to a place in the world and the Lord Jesus has 'em in his care just the same, according only to their works and sins ...'

They shouted her down, laughing at her contemptuously. But she just clapped her hands and shook her head.

'God bless the work! How's it going?' shouted Hanka from the stile.

'God bless! Well, but wet.'

'Have you potatoes enough?' She sat perched on the crossbar.

'They'll bring as many as you need: but it seems to me they're cut too thick ...'

'Too big, cause cut only in half. At the miller's they plant much smaller potatoes. Rocho said that kind give twice the harvest.'

'Must be the German way,'⁶ for as long as Lipce's been Lipce, a potato has been cut as many times as it has eyes,' Gulbasowa grumbled carpingly.

'Why, people today are no more stupid than yesterday, my dear ...'

'Ha, nowadays the egg wants to be wiser than the chicken and lead the flock ...'

'Indeed! But in truth, there are some who have gained years, but no sense with them!' Hanka concluded, getting down from the stile.

'She's that full of herself, as though she were mistress of the whole Boryna place,' muttered Kozłowa, gazing after her.

'Leave her be: that's pure gold, not a woman! I doubt you'll find a better or cleverer. I am with her every day, and I've eyes and sense. She's suffered plenty and borne many a cross, God keep her ...' said Jagustynka.

'There's more crosses waiting ... Jagna's in the house, and when Antek returns, then the fun and games will begin. That'll be something to hear ...'

'I heard tell that Jagna's taken up with the Voyt – is it true?'

They laughed at Filipka, that she was asking about what the sparrows were already chirping.

'Don't you loosen your tongues: sometimes the wind is listening and carries a word where it shouldn't blow!' Jagustynka scolded.

They bent to the ground, mattocks flashing occasionally when striking against a stone, and continued to chatter vociferously, bad-mouthing the whole village.

Hanka, meanwhile, had left the stile and was stooping as she passed under the cherry trees, which caught at her head with their drenched low-hanging branches, frothing with buds and little leaves.

She went to the yard to check the farm, having barely looked out since Easter, as she'd felt worse after the churching. Today's news had roused her from her bed and kept her on her feet, so that although she swayed with every step, she looked into every corner, getting crosser all the time.

The cows seemed somehow morose and were up to their flanks in dung. The piglets hadn't grown much, even the geese seemed strangely sluggish.

'You could at least rub down the gelding with a handful of straw!' she chided Pietrek, who was driving out to spread dung, but the farmhand just muttered crossly and left.

In the barn was a new vexation: in a heap of potatoes lying on the threshing floor was Jagna's pig, rooting to his heart's content, while the chickens were scratching away at the grain screenings that should long since have been stowed away. She scolded Józka for it and gave Witek's curls a tug. The boy narrowly escaped and ran off, while the girl flounced about complaining and wailing. 'I'm forever slaving like a horse, and you shout, but Jagna, who slacks around all day, gets let off!'

'Oh quiet, you idiot, be quiet! You can see yourself what's going on round here ...'

'Can I see to it all? Well?'

'Quiet now! Take the potatoes, or the women'll run out!'

She left off shouting. True, the girl couldn't see to everything, and as for the hired hands! ... Lord have mercy. They'd been awaiting dusk since morning. Getting the hands to do anything was like asking wolves to guard the sheep. Folk had no conscience.

She ruminated bitterly, taking all her crossness out on the pig, so that it ran off squealing, with Lapa hanging on its ear, to boot ...

Then she looked in at the stable, but here was more tribulation – for the mare was chewing at an empty manger, and the foal, filthy as a pig, was pulling straw out of the bedding.

'Kuba's heart would break to see you like this,' she whispered, pushing some hay into the rack and stroking the foal's soft warm nose.

But she could go no further: overcome by sudden discouragement and choking on tears, she leaned against Pietrek's pallet and burst into sobs, not knowing quite why.

Hanka had so little strength that she felt everything collapse inside her like a heavy stone. She could not bear her fate, my Jesus, she could not. So abandoned in the world did she feel, like a windswept tree, alone and exposed to every evil gust! And no one to spill her sorrows to! And no end in sight to ill fortune! Nothing, but forever to poison oneself with worries and tears ...

nothing but eternal torment and waiting for the worst ...

The colt licked her face and she pressed her head to his side and cried even more painfully.

What did she care for the farm, for wealth, for human respect, when she herself had not a moment of happiness in her life, absolutely nothing! She wailed so inconsolably that the mare neighed at her, straining at her chain.

Hanka trudged back to the chamber and, putting the crying baby to her breast, she stared mindlessly at the steamed-up windowpanes, streaked with drops of rain.

The child fretted, whimpering and crying.

'Shush little one, shush! ... Daddy will be back, he'll bring you a toy, he'll come back and sit his little boy on a horse ... shush, little one: A, a, a! Two little kittens had two little mittens! ...

He'll come, Daddy will come!' she sang, rocking him and walking about the room.

'Maybe he will come!' she affirmed, stopping suddenly.

At this thought, she lit up, bracing her hunched shoulders with renewed energy, and such a joy sprang up in her heart that she dashed to the storeroom to cut a piece of pork for him. She wanted to send for vodka, was even heading to the chest, to dress up in her best for him – but then the memory of what the blacksmith had said gripped her aching heart like the sharp talons of a hawk and she froze to the spot, looking round at the room with a feverish gaze as though for rescue, not knowing again what to think, what to do ...

'And if he doesn't come back? Jesus! Jesus!' she moaned, clutching her head.

She was afraid to say it, but the voice echoed inside her as in a well, seething, simmering and gathering in her breast into a cry of dread.

The children began fighting and shouting. She pulled them outside and set about breakfast, for Józka was peering in to see if it was ready and sniffing greedily.

The tears had to stop and her pain lie hidden in her soul, for the yoke of daily toil pressed down on the body, reminding her that work could not wait ...

Busying herself as best she could, though her feet tangled beneath her and everything slipped from her hands, she sighed pitifully, shedding an occasional tear and glancing out longingly into the mist outside.

'Is Jagusia not coming out for the planting?' Józka yelled through the window.

Hanka put aside the pan with the borscht and ran to the other side of the cottage.

The old man lay in bed, his face to the window, as though watching Jagna as she combed her long bright hair in front of the mirror placed on the chest.

'Is it a feast today that you're not coming out to work?'

'I can't rush out with my hair loose ...'

'You could have plaited it ten times since dawn!'

'I could, but I haven't!'

'Don't you play these games with me, Jagna!'

'Or what? Turn me out, will you? Dismiss me from service?' she snapped arrogantly, not hurrying with her hair. 'I'm not in your house or here by your favour!'

'Then whose? Eh?'

'I'm in my own home, you'd best mind that ...'

'Let Father die, and then we'll see if you're in your own home or not!'

'But while he's living, I can show you the door.'

'Me! Show me!' Hanka retorted as though struck by a whip.

'You pick on me like a burr stuck to a dog's tail! Not one word do I say to you and you're at me like I'm some old nag ...'

'You should thank God you don't hear worse!' she bridled threateningly.

'Just try. I'm quite alone, no one stands in my defence, but we'll see who comes out on top!'

Jagna gathered her hair back from her face and her fierce determined eyes stabbed like a knife, so that such a wave of anger carried Hanka away that she began shaking her fists and shouting whatever came into her head.

'Threatening me are you! Go on then, go on! Poor little innocent, poor wronged little waif ... Aye ... Everyone knows what you get up to! The whole parish knows about your little affairs.

Many's the time they've seen you in the inn with the Voyt. And that time I opened the door to you after midnight, coming back from some drunken session, some villainy, you were drunk as a pig ... The pitcher went once too often to the well, too often ... Don't you worry: who lives loudly, of them they speak softly! Your little reign will end, and neither the Voyt nor the blacksmith will defend you then, you ... you!' She fair choked with shouting.

'I do as I do and everyone else can mind their own business!' yelled Jagna suddenly, tossing her hair back on to her shoulders, like a handful of purest flax.

She was furious now and even ready to fight, for she was trembling all over. Her hands fluttered at her hips and she glared so ferociously that Hanka's heart sank. She fell silent and, slamming the door, she ran from the room.

But after this quarrel Hanka was unable to move. She sat with the baby by the window and Józka took care of serving the breakfast.

When they'd gone off to work again, she finally pulled herself together somehow. Putting her work aside, she set off to see her father, who had been ill for several days, but halfway there she stopped and turned back to the cottage.

She was so shaken, she could go no further.

Later, when she'd gathered her strength a little, she worked mechanically, with her hands only, thinking mainly of Antek, and gazing into the distance ...

The weather was improving. The rain had stopped and just dripped from the roofs and trees when the wind shook the branches. The roads were grey with puddles and everywhere grew brighter.

They reckoned that the sun would show itself at noon without fail, for the swallows were already flying high. Flocks of gilded white clouds were floating across the sky, warmth pulsed from the fields and the cry of birds rose above the orchards, snowy with blossom. Meanwhile, the village had grown noisy: almost all the chimneys were smoking, tasty food was being cooked, joy radiated from every house and the hum of women's business carried from cottage to cottage. The girls changed into their best, plaiting ribbons into their braids. Several ran to fetch vodka from Jankiel, who, pleased at the return of the men, gave everyone as much as they wanted on credit, and every moment someone was climbing up a ladder on to the roof to scan all the roads that led from town ...

So caught up in their preparations where they that hardly anyone went out to the fields. They even forgot to put the geese out to the ditches, so that they honked loudly in the yards, while the children, set loose for the day and not scolded, got up to such mischief along the lanes that God help us! The older ones frolicked on the poplar road, scrambling up the trees and pushing off the crows' nests with great long poles, so that the frightened birds, like a cloud of soot, circled high with piteous, mournful cawing. The smaller ones, meanwhile, went after the priest's blind mare, harnessed to a barrel on runners, wanting to chase her from the higher bank into the pond, except that the clever horse would not let herself be tricked. Sometimes, right at the very edge, she'd stop as though on purpose, put down her head and, deaf to their shouts, patiently shake off the mud and clods they did not spare her. But when she felt them clambering on to her barrel and reaching for her bridle, she neighed menacingly and reared, twisting suddenly towards the biggest group of degenerates, so that they scattered with loud shouts. For a good few prayers they amused themselves like this, but in the end they confused her by sticking a burning wisp of hay under her nostrils, so that the frightened horse threw herself sideways, right into the closed Boryna homestead. Smashing through the gate, she entangled herself and the whippletree so completely that the children fell upon her, setting about her with crops as hard as they could.

She would have broken her legs in the bars of the gate had it not been for Jagna, who, on hearing the cries, chased off the rascals with a stick and led her out on to the road. But since the terrified mare had lost her bearings, not knowing which way to turn, and the lads were still lurking behind the trees, she took her all the way to the presbytery.

She was leading her along the path between the priest's garden and the Kłabs', when the organist's brichka pulled up before his house, set deep in the garden. The organist's wife was sitting inside already and Jasio was kissing his family goodbye on the doorstep.

'I've brought the mare, the children were frightening her ...' she began timidly.

'Father, shout for Walek, he can take him! You, blockhead, you leave the mare, do you, so that she can break her legs?' the organist's wife thundered at the farmhand.

Jasio, spying Jagna, merely glanced at his parents and stretched his hand out to her.

'Goodbye, Jaguś.'

'Back to school already?'

Something squeezed at her heart, like a quiet regret.

'I'm taking him to study for a priest, my dear Mrs Boryna!' His mother puffed up proudly.

'For a priest!'

She raised amazed eyes at him. He was sitting on the front seat with his back to the horses.

'I can look at Lipce for longer!' he cried, casting a fond glance over the mossy roofs of his father's house and at the orchards, shimmering with dew and decked with blossom.

The horses moved off at a trot.

Jagna followed in the tracks of the britchka. Jasio was still shouting something to his sisters as they stood sobbing outside the house, but he looked only at her; at her moist blue eyes, like a miraculous May day; at her bright head, wound in plaits whose thick cords crowned her white forehead in a triple rope and hung in a semicircle around her ears; at her face, white-skinned and beautiful as a wild rose.

She, meanwhile, walked on almost helplessly, as though enchanted by his glowing eyes. Her lips trembled, so that she couldn't close her mouth, and her heart palpitated with pleasure, her eyes following him meekly. She was almost shuddering with a strange sweetness ...

It was as though a sudden dream had overwhelmed her and buried her in the fragrance of oblivion ... Not until the britchka turned on to the poplar road did they lose sight of each other. Not until then did those fiery shackles release her and shattered so completely that her gaze seemed suddenly to land upon emptiness and she stopped.

They were driving under the shadow of the poplars now, Jasio still waving his cap in farewell.

She looked all about, rubbing her eyes, as though torn from sleep. 'Jesus, he could lead you right to hell with his eyes ...' She shook off Jasio's glances as though they scalded. 'Organist's son, and he looks like a squire ... And he'll be a priest, maybe they'll even send him to Lipce ...'

She looked back. The britchka had disappeared, only its rattling reached her and the sound of greetings exchanged with passers-by.

'Such a milk tooth, barely more than a child, but a mere look from him's like another man's grip, till you get the shivers and your head spins ...' She shuddered, licking her red lips and stretching, taut with pleasure ...

A chill suddenly ran over her. It was only then she realized she was bareheaded, barefoot and wearing little more than her smock, for she had only some torn shawl over her arms. She blushed, shamefaced, and headed for home along the edge of the village.

'The men are coming back, did you know?' the lasses called to her from the farmsteads, women and even children too, all breathless and almost gasping for joy.

'So what?' she retorted to one of them, almost angrily.

'They're coming back! ... Isn't that something?' They were amazed at her coolness.

'What's the difference, with 'em or without. Idiots!' she muttered, annoyed at how each one was looking out for her man like a lunatic ...

She dropped in on her mother. Only Jędrzych was there. It was the first time he'd got up from his pallet. His injured leg was still bandaged and he was weaving a basket on the doorstep and whistling at the magpies, hopping along the fences.

'Did you know, Jaguś? ... Our lot are coming home!'

'It's like flipping magpies, the whole world repeating the same thing!'

'You know, Nastusia's practically losing her mind that Szymek is coming back too ...'

'Why?' She flashed her eyes fiercely, in her mother's manner.

'Well ... nothing ... Ouph, my leg's aching again ...' he stammered fearfully. 'Quiet, you beggars.' He threw a stick at the cackling brood hens in the hallway.

Pretending to rub his aching leg, he meekly glanced at her strangely gloomy face.

'Where's Mother?'

'Gone to the presbytery ... Jagna, about Nastka, it just slipped out ...'

'Idiot, do you think no one knows! They'll get married and that's that ...'

'But will Mother give permission when Nastuś has only one morgen?'

'If he asks, she'll say no. Ha, the lad's plenty old enough, he should have sense enough to know what and how ...'

'He does, Jaguś, he does, and when he digs in his heels and picks a fight, he won't listen to Mother even. He'll marry out o' spite, claim his bit o' land and farm it himself.'

'Talk rubbish if it makes you feel better, go on, just don't let Mother hear you!'

She was thoroughly morose. How could she not be! Even that Nastka was rejoicing over a boy, and the other girls were no different. They'd surely go mad today, for someone was returning for everyone, everyone.

'True though, all of 'em will be back ...' Caught up in sudden impatient joy, she left the frightened Jędrzych and eagerly rushed back to the house, where she began to prepare and tidy up, just like the others, and feverishly to await those returning, like the whole village at that moment.

She bustled about energetically, even singing with joy and longing. More than once she ran out on to the road, on which everyone's eyes were fixed.

'Who are you looking out for?' someone asked her unexpectedly.

It was as though she'd been clubbed across the head. She paled, her hands dropped like injured wings and her heart trembled in desolation.

True, who was she waiting for? After all, no one was hurrying to her, she was all alone in the world ... 'Maybe only Antek!' she thought fearfully.

'Antek!' she breathed quietly. Her heart surged with a sigh and memories began to drift through her mind like dim mists, like a marvellous dream, but from long ago. 'Perhaps he'll come back!' she mused.

Though only yesterday the blacksmith had assured her that they would not let him leave the prison with the others and that he would be inside many a long year.

'But maybe they will let him go!' she repeated more loudly, already running ahead in her thoughts and expectation, but without joy, without rapture, and with some kind of anxious reluctance lurking in her heart.

'Oh, let him come back! What's it to me!' She shrugged impatiently.

The old man began to babble something.

She turned her back on him in disgust, and brought him nothing to eat, even though she knew that that's what he was whining for, in his own way.

'Just die, will you!' She was suddenly enraged and went out on the porch again so as not to look at him.

Paddles were beating at the pond and under the trees a flash of red could be seen where the women were doing their laundry. At the touch of a faint dry breeze, the willows trembled now and then. Puddles were glistening as the sun prepared to peel itself free of the white clouds and its golden gleams of light danced across the glazed surface of the pond. The rainy mists had subsided, and the blossoming orchards reached over the grey stone walls into the bright air, like great flowering sheaves, wafting fragrance and full of the chirping of birds. The mill rumbled fiercely, and the shrill beating of hammers rang from the forge, while human voices and the fuss of preparation could be heard everywhere, like the humming of bees amid the low trees.

'I might see him, I might!' Jagna mused, turning her face to the wind and to the dew dripping from the drying flowers and leaves.

'Jaguś, are you not coming out to work?' yelled Józka from the farmyard.

It didn't enter her head to resist. Taking a mattock, she went straight off to join the women. The will and desire to revolt fell away, and she was even glad to submit to an order that pulled her free of her thoughts and uncertainty. She was filled only with a strange yearning, so that tears welled in her eyes and her soul strained towards something. She set to work so diligently that all the hired hands were left far behind, but she did not pause, ignoring Jagustynka's jibes and blind to the women's eyes as they constantly ran over her, like dogs skulking, waiting to spring and bite.

Sometimes she'd straighten suddenly for a moment, as a pear tree heavy with blossom straightens on the baulk when tossed by the wind and sways a little, looking about the world with a thousand eyes, and, perhaps remembering a hard winter, weeps fragrant white petals over the rippling green grain ...

Jagna thought of Antek occasionally, but more often of Jasio's glowing eyes. Jasio's red lips were fixed in her mind, and Jasio's pleasant voice echoed in her heart so sweetly that her sorrows took flight. She brightened inside, so that bending even further over the ground, she hung on with all the force of longing to these memories. For she had the sort of nature that, like frail vines or wild hops, must always catch hold of some branch or wind itself around some lofty trunk in order to grow and grow and blossom and thrive and which, torn from any support and left to itself, is easy prey to ill fate.

The hired hands, having had their fill of whispering about her, and since the weather was warm and grand, threw off their aprons and shawls and began to chatter more cheerfully, stretch more frequently and wait longingly for noon ...

'Kozłowa, you're tallest – take a look, can you see the men on the poplar road?'

'Can't see 'em, can't hear 'em!' she replied, standing on tiptoe in vain.

'As if they'd be that quick! ... They won't make it before dusk ... it's a good distance ...'

'And five inns along the crossroads!' mocked Jagustynka, in her usual way.

'Poor beggars, as if inns will be on their minds!'

'A wretched time they've had of it, suffered plenty ...'

'Oh terrible, sleeping well in the warm and stuffed to the gills ...'

'Why, they saw as much kindness as those porkers in the nettles and weeds.'

'Even a dry old potato tastes better in freedom,' said Grzela's wife.

'A fine delicacy such freedom! ... Well, all a poor man has of it is dying of hunger wherever he likes, for they don't ask no fine for that, nor will a guard stick him in prison!' she mused.

'True, my dear, true! But captivity is captivity!'

'And peas with bacon isn't broth made with an aspen peg!' Jagustynka mimicked, so that they all burst out laughing. Filipka had moved off a little. How could she keep up with such a sharp-tongued windbag?

Having made fun of her for all she was worth, Jagustynka began spinning tales about the miller, how he gave mouldy groats on credit, and cheated on the scales for money too. Then, she and Kozłowa together set about the whole village, not sparing even the priest and dragging everyone through the briars with their wicked tongues ...

Grzelowa attempted to defend some of them, but Kozłowa shouted her down:

'You'd be ready to defend even those who smash up churches ...'

'Every human being needs defending just the same!' she murmured mildly.

'And Grzela most of all, from your mangle ...'

'It's not for you to preach decency, being Bartek Kozioł's wife!' she retorted, drawing herself up haughtily.

They all froze, waiting for the two to jump up and tear at each other's hair, but they just gave each other filthy looks. It was a good thing Witek came running just in time, calling them for dinner and to gather the baskets, since they were celebrating from noon.

The hired hands said little even at dinner, which Hanka ordered should be served on the porch, for the sun had emerged completely. The whole world had brightened, and all the roofs and the trees, covered in blossom as though sprinkled with the whitest snow, were basking in the clear fragrant air ...

A quiet sunny day had unfolded and a gentle breeze roamed between the low trees, but soft as a mother's hands caressing her children's faces. The holiday had properly begun, for no one went out to the fields to work after dinner. They even brought the cattle back from pasture, so that only a poor wretch or two was left leading their emaciated sustainers on halters to graze on the boundaries or beside the ditches.

When the sun had moved two men high from noon, people began to gather by the church, warming themselves by the walls and chatting quietly like the birds twittering in the lofty circle of maples and lindens whose branches, sprinkled green, reached right to the church roof. The sun was beating down, as usual after morning rain. Dressed in their best, the women stood in groups, some looking longingly out beyond the walls to the poplar road, while the blind old beggar sat with his dog at the gates of the graveyard and drawled hymns, his ears pricking in all directions and shaking his little bowl at those entering.

The parish priest quickly emerged, in surplice and stole, and bareheaded, so that his bald pate shone in the sun.

The Borynas' Pietrek took up the cross, for Ambrozy would not have managed it for such a distance, and the Voyt, Soltys and one of the sturdier girls carried out the banners, which began at once to wave in the wind, fluttering and shimmering with many colours. The organist's Michał carried the holy water and aspergillum, Ambrozy handed out candles to the confraternity and the organist, prayer book in hand, stood by the parish priest, who gave the signal. Off they went, quietly through the blossom-covered village to the pond, in whose peaceful waters the entire procession was reflected.

Several more women and children joined along the way, and finally the miller and blacksmith squeezed in beside the priest.

And at the very end, behind them all, trailed Agata, coughing often, and the blind old man swinging on his crutches, though he then turned at the bridge, heading in the direction of the inn.

They did not light the candles until they'd passed the mill, which was standing motionless, as the flour-covered miller had joined the company. Putting on a black biretta, the priest crossed himself and intoned:

'He who dwells in the shelter ...'²

They joined in with all their hearts, in whatever way they knew, and set off by the river, along the meadows, which were still full of puddles and so swampy in places that they sank to their ankles. Shielding the tapers with their hands, they spread out along the narrow path in their red-striped woollen skirts like the beads of a rosary.

Glittering in the sun, the river twisted and turned through green meadows, studded here and there with clusters of yellow and white flowers.

The banners fluttered overhead, like the red and yellow wings of giant birds. The cross swayed in front, and the singing voices drifted slowly on the quiet, clear air, falling on the grass, on the clumps of bright green willow and on the briars, flowering white like holy vestments.

Splashing against the banks, densely speckled with marsh marigolds, the water was like a quiet accompaniment to the hymns that folk sang as they surveyed the clear distant sky, the river shimmering with golden flecks, the villages on the dry heights and the ribbons of orchards flowering white and barely visible in the blue air.

The priest and assistants followed right behind the cross and sang with the rest.

'What a lot of ducks!' the priest murmured, peeping to the right.

'Mallards, passing through,' replied the miller, looking beyond the river to the lowlands, overgrown with last year's yellow reeds and alders, where whole flocks of ducks rose heavily time and again.

'And more storks than last year too.'

'They've got plenty to eat on my meadows, so they come from all over.'

'I lost mine, wandered off at Easter.'

'He probably joined a passing flock.'

'What's that on the flattened ridges?'

'I planted a whole morgen of corn ... It's a bit wet there, but they say it's looking like a dry year, so maybe it will grow.'

'As long as it's not like mine last year: there was nothing worth picking.'

'It was good for partridges: plenty did well on it,' the miller joked quietly.

'Aye, the gentry ate the partridges'³ and my greys rang their teeth against the manger ...'

'If there's a good harvest, I'll gift you a wainload, Father.'

'God bless, for last year's clover is mediocre. If dry spells come, it'll be gone!' The priest sighed mournfully and began to sing again.

They were just approaching the first mound, which was so thick with blossoming blackthorn that it rose like a white stack, spiky with flowers and humming with bees.

They surrounded it with a circle of flickering lights. The cross towered above, set in the bushes. They lowered the banners, which unfurled, and the people knelt in a circle as though before an altar on which the majesty of spring was made manifest among the flowers and the hum of bees!

The priest read the prayer against hailstorms while sprinkling holy water towards all four corners of the world, and over the trees, the earth and water, over the meekly bowed heads, over all things trembling with the quiet joy of growth and vigour and happiness, over everything just embarking upon its destiny and everything inanimate.

The people struck up a new hymn and rose more briskly and merrily.

They moved off, heading sharp left, across the meadows and the gentle slopes. Only the children dallied longer, since the Gulbas boys and Witek, according to ancient custom, gave some of the lads a thorough soaking back at the mound, raising such a hue and cry that the priest admonished them from a distance.

Beyond the meadows, they joined a broad boundary track'² with a thicket of slender junipers growing at the edge, as though guarding the arable fields. Wide and twisting this way and that, like the green grassy wave of a river, it was densely spotted with little flowers, with yellow dandelions and white daisies running riot even in the old wheel-ruts. Great boundary heaps were piled in places, overgrown with briars, so that they had to be bypassed, while elsewhere might stand a lone wild pear tree, all in blossom, singing with the hum of bees and ravishing and holy as a Host lifted above the fields, so that you wanted to kneel down before it and kiss the ground that had given it birth. Elsewhere again bent a little birch tree, in its white smock, trailing green plaits, pure and trembling as a young girl making her first communion.

They went slowly up the hill, circling Lipce land from the north, along the miller's fields, murmuring with rye.

The priest followed the cross. Behind him thronged groups of girls and the younger women, and at the end, individually or in pairs, one after another, lagged the old folk, with Agata hobbling far behind the rest. The children scrambled along at the sides, careful to avoid the priest's eye so they could play more freely. They finally emerged on to the plain, where there was greater silence and the wind had stilled completely. The banners hung limp, and the people spread out over a furlong so that the women were dotted like flowers among the green, and the candles' little flames sparkled like golden butterflies.

The sky stretched high and pure above with only an occasional white cloud like a sheep upon endless blue fields across which a great sun flared, flooding the world with warmth and radiance.

The singing grew louder: they bellowed with all their might, so noisily that the birds fled from the nearby trees. Sometimes a frightened partridge whirred underfoot or a hare sprang up somewhere from among the clods and bounded away blindly.

'The winter grain's coming up well,' the priest murmured.

'Ba! I found an ear of corn already yesterday.'

'And who made that mess? ... Half the dung's left on the furrows.'

'Some hired hand's potatoes – looks like a cow's ploughed them.'

'But the harrow will drag everything up. Useless bunglers!'

'Why, it was the reverend's farmhand did the ploughing,' the blacksmith put in quietly.

The priest shrugged angrily, but said nothing and, singing along with the people, cast his eyes over that wide expanse of arable fields that dipped and swelled in places, like the breasts of nursing mothers, rising and falling with each sweet breath, and anything that chanced to fall upon that open bosom could nestle and be nourished and forget harsh fate.

Hej! How far the eye could see, and how wide, in every direction, so that the whole procession seemed but a line of ants among the wheat, and human voices as faint over the fields as the skylarks' warbling!

The sun was rolling towards the west and the wheat glowed golden now. The blossoming trees threw shadows, and the Lipce pond glittered, shining like a pane of glass from the edge of the orchards, foaming white with fallen petals. The village lay lower, as though at the bottom of a huge basin, obscured by trees but with a glimpse of a grey barn here and there, and only the church

with its soaring white walls and golden cross shone against the sky.

To the right of the walkers, meanwhile, spilled plains like endless grey-green waters from which villages emerged in dense clusters of blossoming orchards, roadside crosses and solitary trees. Travelling like a bird, the eye met no boundary in its wheeling other than a rim of dark woods all around.

'Seems almost too still ... Let's hope the rain doesn't come tonight ...' began the priest.

'It won't. It's gone for good and there's a chill blowing.'

'It rained this morning and now there's not a trace of water.'

'It's spring after all, dries in a flash,' the blacksmith chimed in.

They reached the next mound, at a corner of the village boundaries. It was big as a rubble heap and it was said there were war dead buried beneath.¹⁰ A low, rickety old cross stood on it, adorned with last year's little wreaths, holy pictures draped in a cloth and a forked willow huddled at its side, covering its wounds with long young shoots. It was terrifying here somehow, and so desolate that even the sparrows did not nest in the hollow trunk of the tree, and though fertile lands lay all around, the mound was almost bare, its denuded slopes streaked yellow with sand so that only sedums grew, clinging like lichen, and here and there the dry jutting stalks of mullein and last year's cowbane.

They recited the prayers against plague¹¹ and quickening their steps, veered further to the left, beside the poplar road heading right up to the forest, along a narrow, well-worn path.

As they advanced they now pressed close together. Only Agata remained by the mound, where she'd stealthily torn down the cloth from the cross and, following the procession from a distance, she was burying scraps of it along the baulks, according to some superstition.

The organist intoned the litany, but they droned along sleepily, so that only individual voices took it up, for the women were chatting quietly, chiming a noisy 'Pray for us' at the proper moment, while the children pressed ahead and frolicked wantonly. The Borynas' Pietrek, glancing back at the priest, muttered in irritation:

'I'll skin you alive, you little buggers! ... Wait till I get my belt off!'

The priest, now mightily weary, wiped the sweat from his bald head and, gazing over the neighbouring arable fields, chatted with the Voyt:

'Ho, ho! The peas are coming up well here ...'

'Ah, true! ... Must be an early kind, the ground's been well tilled and it's going fast as a forest.'

'I sowed mine back on Palm Sunday and it's only just sprouting.'

'Because your spot's low-lying, Father, and cold. The soil's warmer here.'

'And the barley's come up, nice and even, as though sown by drill.'

'The Modlica folk are good farmers. They work in the manor fashion in the field.'

'Only our fields show no sign of oats or barley yet.'

'Everything were done late, and the rains flattened them so they'll not sprout quickly.'

'So badly tilled, God help us!' observed the priest, sighing mournfully.

'Well, you cannot look a gift horse in the mouth,' said the blacksmith with a laugh.

'You rascals, I'll pull your ears off if you don't stop!' shouted the parish priest at the boys, who were pitching stones at a flock of partridges scuttling across the strips.

Conversations suddenly ceased. The boys crouched on the furrows. The organist began to drone again, the blacksmith joined in fit to split your ears and the women's thin high voices rose in a plaintive chorus so that the litany floated over the fields like a bevy of birds tired after a long flight and now descending slowly and ever lower.

They bunched together in a long singing ribbon across the green fields, and the people working on the Modlica fields, and those more distant still, paused in their work, taking off their caps or kneeling on the strips. The cattle bellowed, lifting their heavy horned heads, while a frightened colt dashed from its mother's side, racing off and away.

There was still a furlong or so to the third mound and the cross by the poplar road, when someone yelled at the top of their lungs:

'There are some men coming out o' the wood!'

'Maybe they're ours?'

'Ours! They're ours!' The crowd erupted and a dozen of them rushed ahead.

'Stop! The service comes first,' the priest ordered sharply.

And stop they did, stepping from foot to foot with impatience. They huddled even closer together, with whatever neighbour happened to be beside. It was a wonder any of them could keep to the spot, but the priest would not release them, though he did quicken his steps.

A gust of wind made the candles go out, the banners flapped and the rye, bushes and blossoming trees began to sway, as though bowing and bending to the feet of the procession. But the people, though they sang ever louder, were beginning to gallop along, their eyes fixed on the distant wood, between the roadside trees where white peasant capotes were now clearly visible.

'Stop pushing, you fools: the men won't run away!' the priest rebuked them, for they were now stepping on his heels, jostling each other.

Hanka, who was in a row with the first farmers' wives, gave a shriek on seeing the capotes. She well knew she'd not see Antek there, but all the same she trembled with joy, her soul swelling with elated hope, so that she stepped to one side, into the ruts, her eyes searching ...

Meanwhile, Jagusia, walking alongside her mother, leapt forwards, as if to run off. A fire tore through her and such shivering that her teeth chattered; and the other women were itching no less to reach their longed-for loved ones. A few girls and boys could not resist. Like water spilled from a bucket, they splashed from the group and, despite the calls summoning them, raced cross-country to the road, their white calves flashing.

The procession quickly reached the Boryna cross standing close by the mound, marking the edge of the Lipce land and the manor woods.

The men were waiting there already in a group in the shade of the huge birches that stood sentry by the cross. They had bared their heads from a distance and the women's eyes beheld the beloved faces of husbands, fathers, brothers and longed-for sons – thinner faces, gaunt, but full of joy and smiles of happiness.

Płoszkas! Sikoras! Mateusz! Kłab! And Gulbas! And old Grzela! And Filip! Dear old starved wretches! Poor things! Jesus, Mary, Most Holy Mother!' rang cries and calls and ardent whispers. Now eyes glowed with joy and arms were outstretched, the wail of stifled cries and shouts swelled in throats, now everyone was carried away, but with a single thunderous word, the priest restrained and quietened the people, and reaching the cross, he calmly recited the prayer 'From fire ...', though he read but slowly, for he couldn't help looking about on all sides and running his kind eyes over the haggard faces.

All knelt in a half-circle, their fervent and grateful prayers accompanied by tears flowing from all eyes, fixed on Christ nailed to the cross. Only when the priest had finished and had sprinkled the heads bowed to the ground with water did he take off his biretta and boom merrily at the top of his voice:

'Praised be! How are you, my dear people!'

How the men shouted back in chorus, flocking towards him as sheep to their shepherd, kissing his hands, clasping his legs, while he pressed each one to his heart, kissed their heads, stroked their lean faces, questioned them attentively and absolved them with a kind word, until, exhausted, he sat down under the cross, wiping away sweat and kindly tears.

And the people were as agitated as water on the boil.

A riot of laughter erupted, of kissing, joyful weeping, children's clamouring, impassioned words and whispers, shouts exploding from delighted hearts, cries of longing now abruptly forgotten. Each woman was pulling her own husband to one side and, amid the cries, each man swayed like a pine in a ring of women and children, in the joyful confusion of babbling and weeping ...

The greetings took a good two prayers and would have stretched into the night, until the priest saw it was time to go on and gave the sign.

They moved off for the last mound, taking the road along the forest, lined with low juniper shrubs and young pines.

The priest intoned the hymn 'Beloved Mother', which they all took up with one great voice, until the wood groaned and echoed in answer. Souls brimmed with jubilation, filling their breasts with such force that their singing broke like a spring storm, sweeping over the forest in a fiery tempest of elation ...

So many folk had arrived that the road was thronged and they had to walk through the wood between the trees and along the fields. The whole of Podlesie was swarming with people and the hymn boomed to the skies.

The singing subsided quickly as a cloud that has released its thunder, so that only those at the very front were left still drawing out the tune, for the rest were now desperate to talk with their dear ones. The procession split up and scattered to the sides. People walked beside the cottages, carrying many of the smaller children. The younger ones went off in pairs, chattering away, and others went into the thickets, far from human eyes, while the lasses, blushing like cherries, clung to their boys, taking no heed of anyone. And here and there, for sheer relief and pleasure, folk broke into loud singing again, until the crows fled their nests for the fields, and the candles went out as they hurried along, and the woods echoed slowly in answer, babbling as though from a deep boundless throat.

Silence then spread so that only footsteps resounded and bursts of animated laughter from the thickets, muffled whispers or the droning broken litanies of the old folk.

Sunset was approaching. The sky towered above like a gilded glass dome, with only a few faint clouds drenched red hovering in the blue heights. The sun shifted to the very rim of the heavens and hung above the woods, and among the great trunks a golden twilight trembled in the green canopy. In the clearings below, solitary trees seemed to burn with vivid flames. The waters flared, hidden in the thickets, and the whole forest seemed engulfed in fire and blood-red smoke. Dark shadows lingered only where lofty old spruces grew in dense coppices, like peasants ranged shoulder to shoulder, lit up here and there with a drizzle of sunshine.

Leaning over the road, the wood seemed to be gazing at the fields, warming the tips of its great branches in the setting sun, and so hushed that the hammering of woodpeckers could be clearly heard and the insistent call of a cuckoo, while from the fields came the chirruping of birds.

The road wound along the very edges of the fields in places, and here the men stopped talking and crowding on to the roadside verges. Instead they walked leaning forward, their eyes taking in the green pastures, the thickly blossoming trees flaming in the sunset, the long strips laid out humbly before them, the fields of winter wheat like gently rippling water that seemed to bow with a joyful rustling at the feet of their masters. The men devoured with their eyes this life-giving mother and many a one crossed himself, many a one uttered 'Glory be', taking off his cap, while the souls of all alike knelt in silent, fervent reverence before this holy, longed-for earth.

More chatter followed these first greetings, fresh joys swelled their hearts, so that they wanted to shout out loud in the forest or indeed to fall upon the fields and weep.

Only Hanka felt utterly forsaken. For here right in front of her and behind her and on every side, men were walking in a noisy group, each one surrounded by women and children nestling against him joyfully like little bushes, everyone chattering, rejoicing, gazing into each other's eyes, pressing close to each other, and she alone had no one to speak to! Everyone was brimming with irrepressible joy, while she, though walking in the midst of them, felt so abandoned and so unhappy, like a tree withering in the thickets on which not even a crow will build a nest nor any bird alight. Hardly anyone even greeted her – why would they! They were all keen to see their own ... What did she matter? ... And so many of them back ... Even Koziol, so that they'd have to keep watch on storerooms again and close their pens ... Even the biggest rebels: Grzela, the Voyt's brother and Mateusz ... Only Antek had not been released ... Perhaps she would never see him again ...

No, she couldn't bear it. These thoughts crushed her like a stone and she could barely drag her feet along, yet she walked on with her head held high, proud of eye and haughty as always. When they began to sing, she sang audibly with the rest; when the priest began the prayer, she was first to make the responses, with blanched lips. Only in those long pauses, when all around she could hear whispers lowered in ardour, did she fix her heavy eyes on the shining cross and walk on, guarding against those treacherous tears, which escaped sometimes like thieves from under her inflamed eyelids. She did not dare even ask about Antek – she might still give herself away, her suffering, in front of people! ... No, no, she'd borne this much, she could overcome still more, she'd endure it ... bear it ... So she enjoined herself, feeling at the same time how the scorching tears were gathering inside her and sorrow choking her throat, how darkness was clouding her eyes, and how her suffering was growing minute by minute.

But she did not lament alone, for Jagusia too felt no better. She walked apart, stealing past timidly like a frightened deer. She too had been buoyed by happiness, so that she'd run ahead and was almost first to reach the men, but no one leapt forwards, no one embraced or kissed her. She'd seen Mateusz's head above the rest from a distance, so it was towards him that she turned her burning eyes, towards him that sudden long-forgotten longings prompted her, and she pushed through the throng with a glad shout. But he seemed not to notice her ... Before she'd reached him, his mother was hanging about his neck, Nastusia's arm was round his waist and the younger children clung all around, while Tereska the soldier's wife, bawling and red as a beetroot, held him by the hand, ignoring everybody's looks.

It was as though she'd been drenched in cold water. Jagna fell away from the crowd and ran into the woods, not knowing herself what the matter was. Why, she longed terribly to feel part of the throng and crush, of that thrilling frenzy of greetings. She wanted to be glad like the others; after all, she had a heart full of ardour, ready for rapture and joyous sobbing, and here she was, forced to be alone, far from people, like a mangy dog.

Trembling with bitter sorrow, barely able to withhold her tears or complaints, she trudged along like a dismal cloud, ready to pour with torrential rain at any moment.

She tried a few times to escape and go back home, but did not manage it. It felt a shame to leave the procession, so she floundered among the people, like Łapa looking in vain for his masters in the throng. She was drawn neither to her mother nor her brother, who was artfully losing himself among the junipers and circling Nastusia, and no one else approached, absorbed as they were with their own families. Until finally she shook with anger and would happily have hurled a stone into that crowd and those overjoyed grinning mugs.

Luckily, they were coming out of the woods now.

The final mound stood at the crossroads, where one road turned directly towards the mill. The sun was setting now and a cold wind blew from the lowlands. The priest hurried the service, for Walek was waiting for him with the brithcka.

They sang a bit more, but everything now went at a trot, for they were tired. The men began quietly to ask about the grange that had burnt down at Easter and whose jutting blackened ruins were visible not far away, not to mention other curious things that were happening on the manor fields.

The squire was at that very moment prancing over the strips on his dun horse following a group of people who looked as though they were measuring out the arable land with long poles. By the cross, where the road forked near the burnt ricks, some yellow-painted wagons had appeared.

'What can that be?' someone remarked.

'Why, they're measuring out the field – only those aren't surveyors.'

'Traders for sure, they don't look like peasants.'

'Look like Germans.'

'For sure: navy capotes, pipes in their teeth and trows stuffed into boots.'

'Indeed, like the Hollanders from Grünbach.'

They whispered together, staring curiously, but a vague unease began to descend upon the gathering, so that they failed to notice the blacksmith furtively and almost stealthily move off along the furrows towards the squire.

'Are they buying the Podlesie grange, or what?'

'They were saying back at Easter that the squire were looking for buyers.'

'But God save us from German neighbours!'

They abandoned their speculations, for the service was ending and the priest was getting into the brithcka with the organist and his wife.

People began to split into groups and slowly to wend their way to the village. They tailed out along the road, or crowded along the baulks, whichever was the quickest way home.

The sun had now set and dusk was gathering on the ground, while twilight flamed against the greenish sky. A white haze shifted from the meadows behind the mill, trailing threads over all the lowlands. The world cloaked itself in silence; only a stork clattered loudly somewhere. Even the sound of voices had died away and the procession sank slowly into the fields, so that only here and there did the streak of a red skirt appear or capotes in a white blur in the blue falling shadows.

Soon the village began to fill and hum, for folk were tumbling in noisily from every side. Every man greeted his long-unseen threshold with the sign of the cross, and more than one fell to the ground before his holy pictures, crying aloud with happiness.

Then there were greetings all over again, and the clamour of women and children, and the endless chatter, interrupted by bursts of laughter and ardent embraces.

The women, animated and almost frantic with the noise, began seating their poor fellows before their bowls, pushing food at them and compelling them with all their hearts to eat.

All injustices were forgotten. The memory of sorrows, long months of separation, all now dismissed, for each man was overwhelmed with joy at his safe return and to see his own, whom he caught hold of again and again and pressed to his heart, plying them with questions.

When all the men had at last eaten their fill, they set off to look at their farms and rejoice over their holdings. It had grown dark already, but still they wandered about the yards and orchards, patting the livestock, touching the hanging branches weighed down with blossom as though they were the heads of beloved children.

Impossible to describe the jubilation in Lipce.

But at Boryna's, it was quite a different matter.

The house was almost empty. Jagustynka had rushed to her people, and Józka and Witek had gone off somewhere crowded and jolly, so that only Hanka moved about the dark chamber, rocking the whimpering baby in her arms and giving vent to her sorrows and bitter burning tears. Except that she was not alone in this today, for Jaguś too was fretting in gloomy pacing, agitated by the selfsame sorrows and beating like a bird against the bars of its cage in just the same way.

So strangely had fate braided the two of them together.

Jagna had rushed back before the others, and though she was gloomy as night and angry, she threw herself into work, putting her hand to whatever task her eyes fell upon, taking on anyone's chores. She milked the cows, fed the calf, even took the pigs their swill, so that Hanka was amazed and could hardly believe her own eyes. Ignoring everyone, Jagna worked as though she wanted to toil and tire herself out enough to forget the wrongs done to her and stifle her sorrows and regrets.

But so what if her hands were limp with working and her back fair splitting, the tears still welled constantly in her eyes and would trickle in a burning chain down her face, and the sorrow in her soul flourished ever more strongly, rampant and relentless.

Her tear-filled eyes were blind to everything and everyone around her, even Pietrek, who from the moment they'd returned had moved no more than a step away from her and helped, chatting quietly and following her with burning eyes, brushing so close sometimes that she instinctively moved away. Until at last, when she was in the barn filling the basket with chopped straw, he seized her by the waist and pushed her against the haymow, mumbling something and reaching hungrily for her lips ...

She didn't resist, not marking where this might be leading, and gave in to his will, almost glad to be caught up and carried away by some force. But when he threw her on the straw and she felt his moist lips on her face, she leapt up like a whirlwind and hurled him from her like a truss of hay, so that he banged on to the threshing floor ...

Jagna shook with a terrible fury ...

'You pox-ridden monster! ... You swineherd! ... You dare touch me ever again and I'll break your legs! ... I'll give you a lesson in romancin' you'll never forget! ...' she yelled, snatching up a rake.

But suddenly she broke off and, finishing the chores, went back to the cottage.

She bumped into Hanka on the threshold: they looked into each other's eyes, glazed with tears and heavy with pain, and parted hurriedly.

The doors of both chambers stood open to the hallway and in both the lamps were lit, so that every moment, as though by some inexplicable compunction, they glanced at each other from a distance.

Later, preparing supper, they bustled side by side, but neither opened their mouths to breathe a word, circling stealthily around each other like thieves. Aye, each knew well what the other was suffering today, with angry, vengeful eyes shooting looks sharp as knives at each other, and tightly closed dumb lips mockingly retorting: 'Serves you right!'

But then came moments when they began to feel sorry for each other, and would have chatted amicably together, with each one just waiting for a chance to utter a kind word. They even paused close by, squinting expectantly at each other, the bitterness having given way, the quarrels having faded, and their common lot and shared abandonment inclining them ever closer ... Yet it did not prevail, for something always held them back: the cry of a child, or some kind of shyness, or a sudden memory of injustices, which in the end drove them far apart again. Bitterness was reignited in their hearts. Their souls were taut with rage again and their eyes began to flash hatred like strokes of lightning.

'Serves you right!' they hissed under their breath, scalding each other with their eyes, ready for a quarrel again, a fight even, in order to vent all their anger on the other.

Luckily, it didn't come to that, for right after supper, Jagna went off to her mother's.

It was a dark evening, but quiet and warm. A few stars glittered through the tawny depths. Vapours hung over the marshes like thick white fleeces, the frogs began to croak and the lapwings warbled plaintively. Meanwhile, dusk swathed the earth, so that only the trees stood out against the brightness of the sky. Orchards showed grey as though sprinkled with lime, giving off fragrance like incandescent thuribles. The scent of cherry blossom and half-open lilac buds, of new wheat, water and damp earth, and of every flower, rose up and mingled in intoxicating sweetness that sent the head spinning.

The village was not yet sleeping. Quiet conversations hummed from the doorsteps and earth benches sunk in the darkness, while the lanes, overshadowed by trees and traversed here and there by streaks of light beaming from the windows, were swarming with people.

Jaguś meant to go straight to her mother's, but she turned to circle the pond, pausing frequently, for at almost every step she stumbled upon some pair, closely entwined and talking quietly.

She met her brother too with Nastusia: they were kissing passionately, their arms about each other.

She ran unwittingly into Marysia Balcerkówna and Wawrzek: they were standing somewhere under a fence in deepest shade, pressed to each other and oblivious to God's world.

She recognized others too, by their voices. From everywhere – by the water, by the fences, from every shadow – floated whispers, breathless words, torrid sighs, murmurs and scufflings. The whole village seemed to be seething with loving and delight, so that even barely grown chits of girls were hanging about with the boys, romping and chasing about the lanes.

It suddenly became so loathsome to her that she began to avoid them and headed for her mother's, but in front of the house she came face to face with Mateusz. Without even glancing at her, he walked past as though she were a tree. He was strolling along with Tereska, holding her around the waist and recounting something ... they passed by; she could still hear their voices and muffled laughter.

She turned suddenly and, at a gallop now, as though pursued by dogs, escaped to the cottage. Meanwhile, the evening, quiet, springlike, fragrant, alive with the joy of greetings, imbued with the holy silence of peace and happiness, flowed on irrepressibly.

Somewhere in the night, in the fragrance-filled orchards or out on the fields, a pipe twittered a wistful tune, as if to accompany those whispers and kisses and joys.

While in the marshes the frogs croaked in a great choir, almost uninterrupted, and others, in the pond, replied with a drawn-out, dwindling wheeze, drowsy as a drooping eyelid ... until the children playing in the lanes began to mimic them, shouting teasingly:

'Reh! reh! reh!

The stork is dead!

I'm glad, you're glad, both glad!

Glad! Glad! Glad!"

CHAPTER 8

The day rose lovely, warm, and robust as a peasant who has slept well and, barely awake, jumps to his feet and, whispering his prayers, rubbing his eyes and yawning a little, sets straight to work.

The sun was rising cheerfully. Huge and red, it slowly climbed into the sky, as though emerging on to boundless fields on which a flock of countless white clouds lay cocooned in blue mists.

A breeze was abroad already, like a farmer up and awakening everything at daybreak. Raking the limp wheat, it blew into the mists, sending them scampering on all sides. It tugged at the drooping branches, hooted somewhere by the crossroads and stealthily swooped towards the still-drowsing orchards and dashed against the thickets, so that the last of the cherry blossom sprinkled down and fluttered to the ground like snow, or fell like tears on to the water of the pond.

The earth was awakening, the birds sang in their nests, the trees murmured the first prayer of the morning. Flowers opened, raising their heavy, damp and sleepy lashes to the sun and dropping pearly hailstones of gleaming dew.

A long shiver of contentment ran through everything that was waking to life again, and somewhere from within the earth, from the depths of all creation, a wordless cry broke free and flew across the world like a dull thunderbolt, as when a nightmare stifles a soundly sleeping human soul, so that it tosses about, terrified, then stiffens and suddenly opens its eyes on to sunlit brightness and greets the day with a happy awestruck cry to find itself still among the living, oblivious that it is waking to another day of toil and pain, just like yesterday, as it would be tomorrow, and evermore ...

So Lipce too began to wake and leap briskly to its feet. Many a tousled head peered out, running sleepy eyes over the world. Some were already washing in front of their cottages, or the women, not yet dressed, were nipping out to the pond for water. Somebody was chopping wood, carts were being wheeled out on to the road, smoke billowed from chimneys and shouts could be heard, rousing the lazy.

It was early still. The sun, only a pair of fellows high to the east, slanted its red flames through murky orchards, and already everything was on the move.

The wind had blundered off somewhere, so that in the pleasant stillness everything could drink its fill of the fresh fragrant morning. The sun shimmered on the waters and dew dripped from the roofs in strings of pearls. Swallows swooped through the clear air, storks flew from their nests on the hunt for food, cockerels crowed on the fences, flapping their wings joyfully, and cackling geese led their young down to the blushing pond. The cattle lowed in the byres, and everywhere on thresholds and in farmsteads they were hurriedly milking cows. From every yard they were driving out the livestock, which swayed along the road with drawn-out lowing, scratching along fences and trees as they went. The sheep, meanwhile, bleating with upturned heads, swarmed down the middle of the road in clouds of dust as they were driven to the square in front of the church, where a few of the older boys on horses, cracking their whips and cursing spiritedly, were rounding up the wandering flock and yelling at the latecomers.

When they set off, packed together along the poplar road, for the common grazing ground¹ that lay beyond the woods, they became lost in a dewy swirl of dust, reddening in the sun, so that only the bleating of the sheep and the barking of dogs escaped the thick cloud, marking the way they'd gone.

Soon after them came the goose girls, driving their white honking flocks, or someone leading a cow in calf out on to a baulk or a hobbled horse by the mane to the fallow land. Nor did it quieten much later, since the whole village was preparing for the fair. It was about a week after the men had returned from prison.

Everything in Lipce was slowly returning to normal, as though after a fierce storm that had wreaked considerable havoc, so that people, their fears having subsided, though still protesting and lamenting their fate, set about recouping their losses, little by little.

Indeed, it was not yet going as it should, for though the men had taken charge with a firm hand, still they lazed a little of a morning, often lingering under their quilts until late. Many still tended to look in at the inn, supposedly to seek news about the case; one or another still spent half the day loitering about the village, chatting with their cronies, while others still despatched only the most urgent tasks, for it wasn't easy after their prolonged inactivity to take themselves firmly in hand. But with every day, things gradually changed for the better, every day the inn and lanes grew emptier, and every day necessity took them by the scruff and bent them to the ground, harnessing them to hard and arduous toil.

Since it was the day of the fair in Tymów, hardly anyone went out to work as everyone was getting ready.

The preharvest dearth seemed to greet them early this year, squeezing so hard the cottages were squealing with it. If anyone had something left to sell, he quickly brought it out, while others went to chat with their neighbours, to see the world, or at least to take a quick glass.

Everyone had cares aplenty of their own and where were folk to console themselves, complain, seek good cheer or learn the latest news, if not at a fair or the indulgences?

So when the livestock had been led to pasture, they began to get ready and prepare the carts, while those on foot had already departed.

The poor were first to set off. In tears, Filipka drove her six old geese, torn from their barely grown young, for her husband had fallen sick on his return and there was nothing to put in the pot.

One of the other hired hands was pulling a heifer by the horns that had only recently come into calf ... And since poverty has long legs and sharp claws, wry-faced Grzela, though he sat on eight morgen, was leading a milch cow on a straw rope, while his neighbour, Józek Wachnik, came herding a sow with her piglets.

The poor wretches saved themselves in any way they could, for many a one was so hard-pressed that he was taking his last old nag to sell, as Gulbas had to. Balcerkowa was suing him for fifteen roubles that he had once borrowed for a cow, and now she was threatening him with a sentence so that, despite the weeping, wailing and threats of his whole family, the poor fellow had mounted his chestnut and ridden off to sell it.

The carts slowly rolled off, one after another, for the farmers too were taking what they had, what with the Voyt clamouring about taxes and threatening fines. The housewives in turn set off with their wares. Brood hens were clucking away under aprons or a portly gander would hiss from a handcart. Others on foot carried eggs wrapped in shawls, or butter whisked away from the children, and some even took their best woollen skirts or heaved spare pieces of linen on to their backs.

It was poverty that drove them, for harvest was still far away.

Everyone was in such a hurry that even the Mass today took place notably earlier. Only a few women knelt before the altar, unable to keep up with the priest, for barely had they said the prayers at the Elevation when Ambroz was already putting out the candles and jangling his keys. Tereska the soldier's wife, who had come to the priest on some business, caught him just as he was leaving for his breakfast. She didn't dare accost him and so stood looking through the pickets to see when he would appear on the porch. But before she could steel herself to step forward, he had got into his britchka and was barking an order to head sharp for Tymów.

Sighing sadly, she stared at length along the poplar road at the dust hanging in the air and lying in a grey cloud across the fields. The wagons were rattling away, with only a flash of red to be seen between the trees where the women were herding the geese.

In a short while Lipce was quiet, the mill had ceased to clatter, the forge was shut and the roads were completely empty, for whoever had stayed behind was pottering about in the farmsteads or in the gardens behind the cottages.

Much distressed, Tereska headed home.

She lived beyond the church, next to Mateusz, in a little cottage with a single room and half a hallway, since her brother had taken down the other half when they'd divided it up and removed it to his own plot, so the sawn-through wall and roof stood jutting out like ribs, pressing against a sooty chimney.

On the doorstep she saw Nastka, as only a narrow orchard separated them.

'Well? Did he read it to you?' she called, running towards her.

Tereska told her from the stile what had happened.

'Maybe the organist can read it? ... He can make out handwriting.'

'Aye, he can, but how can I go with nothing?'

'Take a few eggs.'

'Mother's taken 'em all to town. There's only duck's ones left.'

'Don't fret: he'll take those.'

'I'd go, but I'm scared! I wish I knew what it said!' She took her husband's letter from her breast, which the Voyt had brought yesterday evening from the chancellery.² 'What can it be?'

Nastka took the grubby paper from her hands and, crouching by the stile, she smoothed it out on her knees and attempted again with some difficulty to make sense of it. Perched alongside on a crossbar and leaning her chin on her fists, Tereska gazed with apprehension at the marks on the paper, of which all that Nastka could make out, syllable by syllable, was 'Praised be' at the beginning.

'I can't puzzle out any more, it's no good. Mateusz would manage for sure.'

'No, no!' Blushing deeply, Tereska began to beg her quietly: 'Don't tell him about the letter, Nastuś, don't ...'

'If it were printed, I could read it like a book. I know the letters and I can tell what's what, but here I cannot make anything of it: it's all scribbles and swirls. Like someone's let a fly dipped in ink loose across the paper.'

'You won't tell, Nastuś, eh?'

'I told you yesterday, it's now to me. When your man comes back from the army, it'll all have to come out!' she said, getting up.

Tereska seemed to choke down a cry, but she just cleared her throat and did not say a word.

Nastka went off somewhat crossly, calling the chickens along the road, and Tereska, tying five duck eggs into a bundle, trudged off to the organist's.

But it cannot have been easy for her; she paused often and, hiding in the shadows, kept peering anxiously at the incomprehensible letters.

'Maybe they're letting him go?'

Panic clutched at her throat. Her legs buckled and her heart was thudding so desperately that she leaned against the trees, her tearful eyes darting about as though for help.

'Or maybe he's only writing about money!'

More and more slowly she went, weighed down by her husband's letter. It seemed to be scorching her palm, the way she was forever passing it from hand to breast and even wrapped it in a corner of her shawl.

There looked to be no one in at the organist's: the door stood open on to empty rooms, except for one, where the window was curtained with a skirt and someone was snoring loudly under a quilt. Timidly she crossed the hallway and looked about the farmyard, but there was only a lass sitting in front of the kitchen with a churn between her knees, beating the butter and chasing off flies with a branch.

'Where's the mistress?'

'In the garden. You'll hear her right soon ...'

Tereska stood to one side, crumpling the letter in her hand and pulling her scarf further down her forehead, as the sun was climbing from behind the buildings.

From the priest's yard, separated only by a fence, came the raucous squawks of poultry. Ducks flapped about in puddles and young turkey hens squealed under the fence somewhere, while the turkey cocks spread their wings, hopping and gobbling vociferously at the piglets lazing in the mud. Doves flew up in front of the barn, circled in the air and kept landing on the red roofs of the presbytery like a snow cloud. A damp but bracing warmth pulsed from the fields. The flowering orchards basked in the sunshine. Apple trees laden with blossom rose from the green land like white clouds dusted with the beams of daybreak, while the bees flew to work with a quiet hum. There was even the flicker of a butterfly like the petals of a flower, or a flock of sparrows would fall upon the fences, twittering loudly.

Suddenly the tears sprang from Tereska's eyes and trickled down her face.

'Is the organist at home?' she asked, turning her face away.

'Where else. Priest's out, so he's lazing about like a hog.'

'The father's gone to the fair, I should think?'

'Aye, they're meant to be buying a bull.'

'Hasn't he got enough livestock? Eh?'

'He who's got enough wants even more,' the lass muttered.

Tereska fell silent, suddenly overcome with misery that some people had everything, up to the ears, whereas she could barely get by and often went hungry.

'Mistress is coming!' the girl called, vigorously working the paddle in the churn so that cream spattered all around.

'This is your doing, you layabout! ... You let the horse into the clover on purpose!' the shrill voice of the organist's wife rang out in the orchard. 'You couldn't be bothered to take it to the fallows. Jesus, you can't depend on anyone! How many acres of clover has he got down him! You wait, I'll soon tell, and Uncle will give you a hiding you'll never forget, you loafer.'

'I took him right to the fallows, I hobbled him myself and tied the rope to the peg,' Michal insisted tearfully.

'Don't you fib. Uncle will be having a talk with you, you'll see ...'

'It wasn't me, I'm telling you, Auntie.'

'Who, then? The priest?' she yelled derisively.

'Too right, Auntie: the priest grazed his horses on it,' he said, raising his voice.

'You're mad! ... Shut that mouth, before it gets around!'

'I will not, I'll tell him to his face, because I saw it myself. Auntie's shouting at me, and it were the priest. I went for the horses before sun up: the bay were lying down, and the mare were grazing. They were where I'd left them for the night.'² They left enough traces – you can check, they're still fresh. I untied 'em and got on the bay, and then I see there are some horses in our clover. It were just coming dawn. I got to the priest's garden down the cattleway to block 'em. I come out on the Kłqbs' path, and there's the priest with his breviary, looking all about and driving 'em in with his whip, deeper and deeper into the clover, so ...'

'Quiet, Michal! Did you ever, the priest himself ... I've been saying for ages, that hay last year ... Quiet, there's some woman coming.'

She waddled forwards hurriedly, just as the organist shouted for Michal from under his quilt. Tereska handed over the bundle with the eggs and, clasping her knees, asked timidly for the letter from her husband to be read.

She told Tereska to wait.

Tereska was not called inside for a good few prayers. Completely unkempt and dressed in only his long johns, the organist was sipping coffee as he read the letter.

She listened with a sinking heart, for her husband was announcing his return for harvest, together with Kuba Jarczyk from Wola and Grzela Boryna. The letter was kind, full of concern for her. He asked about everything that was happening at home, sent greetings to everyone he knew and was bursting with joy at the prospect of coming home. Grzela added a note asking her to tell his father of his return. The poor soul clearly had no idea what had happened to Maciej.

But these warm kindly words cut Tereska like whips and crushed her to the very ground. She struggled not to let them see, to withstand this terrible news calmly, but the treacherous tears trickled out of their own accord like scalding beads.

'How she rejoices at the return of her husband!' the organist's wife murmured mockingly.

With hailstones spilling even more copiously from Teresa's eyes, the poor thing ran away before she cried out loud, and for a long time she wandered between the farmsteads.

'Now what will I do, poor wretch? What?' she declared, desolate and helpless.

Aye, he'd be back all right, her husband, and find out everything! Fear swept over her like a vicious gale. Jasiiek was decent, but headstrong like all the Płoszkas: he wouldn't let an injury pass, he'd kill Mateusz even! Jesus, help, Jesus! She did not think of herself at all. Weeping and struggling inside, she found herself at the Borynas'. Hanka wasn't there – she'd gone to town early – and Jagna was at her mother's, so only Jagustynka and Józka were at home, spreading out the soaked linen in the orchard.

She told them about Grzela and made to leave as quickly as possible, but the old woman drew her aside and in a strangely kind whisper said:

'Tereska, pull yourself together, have some sense – you'll not cut out evil tongues ... Jasiiek will return and find out anyway. A farmhand's for a month, but a husband is for life! I'm giving you good advice.'

'What are you going on about? What?' she mumbled, as though not understanding.

'Don't pretend to be stupid – everyone knows about you. Send Mateusz packing while there's time, then Jasiiek won't believe 'em. He's been missing you, you'll easily persuade him of whatever you want. Mateusz took a fancy to your quilt, but he's not bound to it, after all. See him off, while there's time. Don't be afraid, Jasiiek's no weakling ... And love will pass like yesterday, you won't hold on to it, even paying for it with your life. Loving's only a fatty gravy for Sunday: eat it every day and you'll quickly tire and be regretting it. They do say that loving's crying, and wedlock's the grave. Maybe it's true, but a grave with a man and bairns is better than freedom alone. Don't wail: save yourself while there's time. If your man maltreats and throws you out o' the house, where will you go? Out into the world to ruin and mockery! Ha, out o' the frying pan into the fire! If you fall out o' the cart, then just try running after the tailboard with your tongue hanging out! You'll soon find yourself breathless against the wind, your strength will give out and they'll quickly leave you behind! Foolish girl, every man's got breeches, be he Mateusz or Kuba.

Every one promises just the same, every one of 'em's like honey while you're sweet to him. Mark this and remember what I'm saying. I'm your aunt after all, and want what's best for you.'

But Tereska could bear no more. She escaped into the fields and, throwing herself down in the rye, she finally gave way to her misery and tears.

In vain did she try weighing up the old woman's words, when every moment such regret for Mateusz would seize her that she'd throw herself against the furrows like a wounded animal.

Then some commotion nearby brought her to her feet.

It seemed a fierce quarrel had broken out in front of the Voyt's cottage.

Aye: the Voyt's wife and Kozłowa were at loggerheads, at each other tooth and nail, like there was no tomorrow ...

Separated by the fences and the road, they stood facing each other in only their smocks and woollen skirts. Almost breathless with anger, they raged at each other at the tops of their voices, shaking their fists threateningly.

The Voyt was harnessing the horses to the cart, chatting from time to time to the boy from Modlica, who was sitting on the porch and practically stamping his feet with delight, egging on the women with gleeful shouts.

Their yells spread far and wide so that people came running to see the spectacle. Several were already standing in the road, and heads were poking over every neighbouring fence and cottage corner.

God save us, how they quarrelled! The Voyt's wife, a docile woman and quiet as a rule, had hit the roof today and grew more and more angry, whereas Kozłowa was now deliberately calm and let nothing slip, jabbing at the other woman bit by bit with mocking words.

'Yap away, Mrs Voyt, yap away – the dogs'll not outbark you!' she called.

'It's not the first time, nor the second! Not a week goes by when something doesn't go missing from the house! Brood hens, ducklings, ducks, even an old goose, not to speak of the damage in the garden and orchard! May you poison yourself at my expense! May it twist your guts inside out! May you croak by the fence ...'

'Shriek away, old crow, shout if it helps to ease you, Mrs Voyt ...'

'And today!' she turned to Tereska, emerging on to the road. 'Five pieces of linen I brought out to bleach. I come out after breakfast to soak them. One is missing! I look everywhere! Like the ground's swallowed it up! It were held down with stones, and there were no wind! The finest linen, you couldn't buy better – gone!'

'Pig's fat has flooded your eyes so's you cannot see!'

'Because you've stolen it!' she shrieked.

'I stole it! Just you say that again, go on!'

'You old thief! I'll testify in front of everybody. You'll own up when they march you to prison in chains.'

'She's calling me a thief! D'you hear, people! I'll take you to court, as God's in heaven, everyone heard. I stole from you, did I? Got witnesses have you, you old bag?'

Snatching up a picket, the Voyt's wife rushed into the road and, advancing like a rabid dog, screeched ferociously:

'I'll confirm it with this stick! I'll testify you ... why you ...'

'Come on, Mrs Voyt! You just touch me, you pig of a crone! You touch me, you bitch of a monster!' Kozłowa screamed, running towards her.

Pushing aside her husband who was holding her back, she planted her legs wide and, hands on hips, began shouting mockingly:

'Hit me, go on, and the slammer won't pass you by, Mrs Voyt!'

'You shut your mug, before I put you in the jug first myself!' yelled the Voyt.

'Rabid dogs are locked up first, that's your job, so better put your woman on a lead, so she don't bother passers-by!' Kozłowa thundered, unable to hold back any longer.

'Mind yourself, woman, you're talking to an official!' he cried threateningly.

'You can stick your office you know where – got that! Hark at him, threatening me. Maybe you took the linen yourself for your lover's smock. The *powiat* money ain't enough for you, cause you've drunk it, you old soak. They know what you're up to, don't you worry. You'll be the one behind bars, Mr Official, you will that!'

But that was too much for both of them and they leapt upon her like wolves. First the Voyt's wife smacked her with a stick across the mug, then, with a wild squeal, she stuck her claws in her mop of hair, while the Voyt began punching with his fists wherever he could.

In a flash, Bartek leapt forward to help his wife.

They were clinched together like dogs in a heap so tangled you couldn't tell whose fists were pommelling like flails, whose heads were rolling and who was shouting. They fell against the fence and then stumbled back to the road like sheaves whisked by a gale, until in the end, wrestling ever more ferociously, they crashed to the ground and into the sand.

Covered in a cloud of dust so that only cries and curses could be heard, they tumbled about the road, hitting each other and shrieking at the top of their voices.

Sometimes one or another would break free of the pack, sometimes all of them stood up together and, grabbing whatever was to hand, again rained blows upon each other, grappling and grabbing one another by the head, ribs or collar.

The yelling was heard throughout the village. Chickens clucked, terrified, in the orchards, dogs began barking, the women began to wail, crowding around helplessly, until some men ran up and pulled apart the brawlers.

Impossible to describe what cursing, tears and threats still followed. The neighbours soon dispersed, so that they couldn't be called upon as witnesses, but they spread the news everywhere, in confidence of course, of how the Voyts had roundly beaten the Koziols.

And not many prayers hence, the Voyt, his jaw swollen, and his wife, herself well bruised and scratched, were the first to set off to lodge a complaint. An hour later, the Koziols set out in turn.

Old Płoszka agreed to drive them to town, clearly eager to do so since he charged them nothing, just to get at the Voyt.

Since they, too, were lodging a complaint, they set off just as they'd emerged from battle, without cleaning themselves up at all.

They rode through the village on purpose, at a snail's pace, so as to recount their wrongs and display their injuries to anyone who wanted to have a gander.

Kozioł's head was smashed to the bone and the blood poured all over his face, neck and chest, visible through his torn shirt. It didn't much hurt him now, but he kept clutching his sides and screaming horribly:

'Lordy, I cannot stand it! They've broken all my ribs! Help, people, help, I'm dying!'

And Magda joined in, lamenting:

'Thrashed him with a post, he did! Quiet, you poor devil! Abused you like a dog, but there's still justice and punishment for thugs, there is! Quiet, you poor devil! He'll pay for it, he will!'

Wanted to kill him, everyone saw – they could barely rescue him, and honest folk will testify so in court!' she yelled, erupting in a terrible roar again and again. So battered she could scarcely be recognized, she went bareheaded, her hair pulled out by the roots, ears torn, eyes bloody and her whole face ripped by fingernails, as though someone had dragged a harrow over it. Though they knew very well what a piece of work she was, many still felt sorry for her.

'Fancy giving someone such a beating, eh!'

'Shameful, outrageous – why, they're half dead.'

'Proper carve-up, eh? A butcher couldn't have managed it better ... But Mr Voyt can do as he pleases. Isn't he somebody after all, an official?' Płoszka threw in mockingly, turning to the people.

They were greatly disconcerted by it all, and even when the Koziols had long passed through the village, it was some time before people calmed down.

Tereska, who had hidden out of fright during the fight, finally emerged, when both parties had left for the courthouse.

She looked in at the Koziols' right away, for Bartek was a cousin on her mother's side. There was no one there except the three children brought from Warsaw, sitting outside against the wall.

They were huddled together, greedily chewing on undercooked potatoes and defending themselves from the piglets with squeals and spoons. So emaciated were they, so scrawny and grimy, that she felt a sudden pity. She took them inside to the hallway and, closing the door, rushed off with the news.

Only Nastka was in at the Gołąbs'.

Mateusz had left before breakfast already, to see Bylica's son-in-law, Stach. Together they climbed inside the tumbledown house to see if it could be restored. Bylica followed them, stammering something from time to time, while Pan Jacek sat on the threshold, as always, smoking and whistling to the doves circling the cherry trees.

The sun was climbing towards midday now and it was grand and warm.

Above the fields the sultry air shimmered like water, while the wheat and orchards seemed absorbed in gazing at the sun, the only movement the falling blossom from the Bylica cherry trees, fluttering on to the grass like white butterflies.

Noon was approaching when Mateusz finished inspecting the cottage, and jabbing with his axe a few more times along the sides, he declared emphatically:

'It's completely decayed, nothing but rotten wood – can't be putting up anything, it's useless ...'

'I could buy some new stuff, maybe ...' Stacho whispered beseechingly.

'You'd have to buy for the whole lot. You'll not recover a single beam from this rubbish.'

'For heaven's sake!'

'Why, the sill-beam would still hold a bit, just new door jambs ... you could prop up the walls ... pull 'em straight with crampons ... why ...' stammered old Bylica.

'Put it up, then, if you're such a master builder. I can make nothing with rotting wood,' Mateusz retorted crossly, pulling on his spencer.

Weronka came up with a child in her arms and began complaining:

'And what'll we do now, eh?'

'We'd need two thousand for a new one!' said Stacho, sighing anxiously.

'Ha, for one room with a porch.'

'Maybe some wood could be got from our forest ... aye, at least a bit ... and the rest I can buy ... aye ... it would do ... Could ask at the offices ...'

'Like they're going to give it now, when the courts got an order on the forest! ... Why, even gathering's forbidden. Wait to the end of the case for your cottage!' Mateusz advised.

'Till pigs fly, but where'll we go in winter? Where?' burst out Weronka and began to cry miserably.

They fell silent. Mateusz gathered up his carpentry tools while Stacho scratched his head and Bylica wiped his nose behind the quoin, so that only Weronka's sobbing could be heard in the sad silence.

Suddenly Pan Jacek got up and said loudly:

'Don't cry, Weronka. The wood will be found for the house.'

They froze, standing there with mouths wide open, until Mateusz came to first and burst out laughing:

'The clever man promises and the stupid man rejoices! He's nowhere to lay his head but he's handing out houses to other folk!' he said sharply, glowering at him, but Pan Jacek said no more. He sat down again, smoked a cigarette, plucking his beard and casting his eyes over the sky as before.

'Just wait a bit and he'll be promising you a whole grange,' Mateusz laughed and departed with a shrug. He turned sharp left, taking the path leading behind the barns.

There were but few people working their gardens today, just the red flash of a woman here and there, or some man mending a roof or tinkering in a barn, its doors opened wide on to the fields. Mateusz was in no hurry. He was happy to stop and chat with the men about the Voyt's brawl, he grinned at the girls, quipping merrily, and as for the older ones, his bawdy remarks provoked much chortling throughout the gardens, so that many a woman sighed after him as he passed.

He was handsome, after all, and sturdy as an oak, and like a king among farmhands in the village, the greatest strongman after Antek Boryna, as good a dancer as Stach Płoszka with a ready wit, to boot. What's more he could turn his hand to anything – make a cart, build a stove, fix a house or play beautifully on a pipe – so though he'd barely any land to his name and could never hold on to a grosz, open-handed as he was, many a mother would gladly have drunk a whole calf away with him to have him as son-in-law, and many a girl had already granted him favours, calculating that it would lead more quickly to a reading of the banns.

But all these efforts came to nothing: he drank with the mothers, made love to the daughters and slipped out of wedding like an eel.

'It's not easy to choose, each of 'em is good and even better ones are coming up fast. I'll wait ...' he'd say to the matchmakers proposing various girls to him.

And in the winter he had taken up with Tereska and lived with her almost in full sight of the whole village, ignoring both talk and threats.

'I'll return her when Jasiek comes back. He'll even stand me a drink for guarding his woman,' he said, laughing with his friends quite soon after his return, for he'd grown weary of her and was slowly retreating.

And now, going for his dinner, he chose the long way round, to joke with the girls along the way and give a quick nip to any he could. Quite unexpectedly he ran across Jagna: she was weeding in her mother's garden.

'Jagusia!' he cried joyfully.

Jagusia raised her head, towering over the furrow like a slender hollyhock.

'Oh, noticed me, have you? Fancy. That quick, and only a week back in the village ...'

'Why, you're even more beautiful!' he whispered in wonder.

Her skirt was tucked up to her knees, and from under her red headscarf, tied under the chin, her great enchanting eyes glowed blue. White teeth shone between cherry-red lips and her whole face, rosy as an apple, was so beautiful it begged to be kissed. Putting her hands firmly on her hips, she fixed her glittering eyes on him, glaring so hard that a shiver ran through him. He looked about and came closer.

'I've been looking for you for a week and hunting in vain.'

'Flatter the dog, he might believe you. Every evening he's flashing his teeth in the yards, every evening singing a tune to a new lass, and now he's going to persuade me something different!'

'That's how you greet me, is it, Jagus? Eh?'

'How else? Maybe I should clasp your knees and thank you for remembering me?'

'I mark how you used to receive me before.'

'Before isn't now.' She turned her face away. He lunged forwards suddenly, seizing her with greedy arms.

She tore away in anger. 'Stop it, or Tereska will scratch my eyes out!'

'Jagusia!' he could barely groan.

'Get back to your soldier's woman with your lovin' ... Take advantage before he gets back. She fed you up in the slammer, went to endless trouble for you, and now look how you're repaying her!' she snapped, sharp as a whip, but so derisively that Mateusz was left speechless.

Feeling suddenly ashamed, he turned red as a beetroot, shrinking away, and simply fled.

And Jagna, though she'd said what she felt and had been on her mind all week, was now overcome with remorse. She hadn't thought he would get angry and go off.

'Idiot, it were just spite talking!' she thought, looking after him gloomily. 'And to get aggrieved like that straight off! ... Mateusz!'

But he did not hear, and shot through the orchard like a hunted beast.

'That evil wasp!' he muttered, rushing straight home now. Anger and surprise upset him by turn. Why, she'd always been such a shrinking violet, never opened her mouth. And now she'd abused him like a dog! The shame of it; he looked about to see if anyone had heard her cheek.

Reproaching him with Tereska! Idiot! ... What was that soldier's woman to him? ... A pastime, nothing more! And the way she'd flashed her eyes! The way she'd crossed her arms! The delight with which it had all come bursting out! ... Jesus, it were no shame to take lip from one like that, if you could get to the honey ... He got the shivers suddenly and slowed down in front of the cottage.

'She's peevish I didn't remember her ... but what fault is that o' mine ... and then Tereska ...' He grimaced as though he'd tasted vinegar. He'd had enough of that crybaby, was sick of her constant squealing. He wasn't marrying her after all, so why'd he have to hold on as though to a cow's tail! She'd got a man! And the priest, too, ready to rebuke him from the pulpit! A man goes soft hanging about with that kind. Devil take these women! He raged inside.

The lunch was still being made, so he berated Nastka for dilly-dallying and looked in on Tereska. She was just milking the cow in the orchard and raised strangely sad eyes to him, the tears only just dry.

'What are you bawling for?'

She excused herself quietly, gazing at his face with loving eyes.

'You'd best be minding the udders, you're squirting milk on your skirt.'

He was gruff today, unkind, so that she puzzled over what had happened, quiet as a mouse now, since he bristled with anger at every answer and rolled his eyes.

Though he seemed to be searching for something in the orchard and near the house, he was in fact observing her surreptitiously, marvelling more and more:

'What was I thinking? So puny and feeble ... Neither fish nor fowl! A chewed bone. No better than a Gypsy. Neither looks nor ...'

She did have beautiful eyes, true, perhaps equal to Jagusia's: huge, bright as the sky and framed with black brows. Whenever he met them, he turned his head and swore quietly:

'Gawps like a calf when it lifts its tail!'

Her gaze provoked him and made him even more angry.

'I'll not look at you on purpose, let dogs gawp at their tails! You won't drag me back,' he thought to himself.

They ate dinner together, but he didn't speak once, or even look in her direction. He spoke only to Nastka from time to time:

'A dog wouldn't touch these groats: toasted to a cinder, they are!'

'Eh, come on – they're a tiny bit burnt, but if they're not to your taste ...'

'Don't you dispute with me! You've tossed it with more flies than you have pork fat.'

'Now it's flies bother him! So picky! Won't poison you!'

Whereas with the cabbage he complained of the old fat.

'Might as well use cart grease for seasoning, would be no worse.'

'Go lick the axle and see. I'm not testing it!' she replied curtly.

He gave them hell and picked on every little thing. Since Tereska had said not a word the whole time, then right after lunch he started on her. He'd noticed her cow scratching at the quoin.

'She's caked in dung: can you not wipe her down, eh?'

'It's wet in the barn, and she rolls about in it.'

'Wet! There are plenty of needles in the forest, plenty; but you just wait for someone else to rake 'em up and bring 'em in. Why, the beast'll chafe its withers and rot in all this dung! That many women in the house and not a bit of order!' he yelled, but Tereska gave way meekly, not daring to defend herself, but only pleading for mercy with her eyes.

She was quiet as always, submissive and industrious as an ant, even glad that he'd taken the upper hand, fierce and domineering. But that made him even more enraged. Those loving timid eyes annoyed him, her quiet step annoyed him, her meek face and her constant flitting beside him annoyed him. He wanted to shout at her to get out of his sight.

'A plague on it all, damn it!' he exploded eventually and, snatching up his carpentry tools, not even taking a breather at noon, he went to the Kłąbs', who had some work to be done in the house.

They were still sitting outside, at their bowls. He lit a cigarette and sat down by the wall. The Kłąbs were chatting about Grzela Boryna's return from the army.

'He's coming back already?' he asked calmly.

'Did you not know? Together with Tereska's Jasiek and Jarczyk from Wola. At harvest-time, they said. Tereska rushed off to the organist's today with a letter for him to read. He told me about it.'

'Well, there's news! Jasiek coming back!' he exclaimed unwittingly.

They all fell silent, firing glances at each other, and the women reddened, trying to suppress their laughter. But he didn't notice and, as though glad of the news, said coolly:

'It's good he's coming back; maybe they'll stop gossiping about Tereska.'

How the spoons hung in the air over the bowls, so stunned were they, and he, looking round with insolent eyes, added:

'You know they spare her not at all. She's nothing to me, though she's kin on my father's side, but if it were me, I'd shut those gossips' mouths once and for all so they'd never forget it! But women are the worst to each other. You could be white as snow, they won't let it go and still heap you with mud.'

'For sure, for sure!' they echoed, eyes fixed on the bowls.

'Have you been to Boryna's already?' he asked anxiously.

'I keep meaning to and every day something crops up.'

'He's suffering for everyone and no one remembers him.'

'Have you looked in on him? Eh?'

'Not likely. If I go, they'll say I'm after Jagna.'

'Well! He's careful as a trollop after a fall,' muttered old Agata, sitting by the fence with a bowl on her knees.

'Cause I'm sick of all the yapping.'

'Even a wolf settles down when his fangs get blunt,' said Kłab with a laugh.

'Or when he's looking for a pallet to settle on,' Mateusz suggested.

'Ho, ho! Well, you can look when you send the vodka round,' joked young Kłab.

'Exactly, I'm always deliberating who to drink to.'

'Choose quick and ask me to be a bridesmaid, Mateusz,' squealed Kasia, the eldest.

'When it's no easy business: all of 'em are equally fine and each as good as the next. Magdusia's the wealthiest, but no teeth already and her eyes are runny; Franka's got a kid; Marysia's too generous with the lads; Ewka, though she's got a whole hundred zlotys just in coppers, is a lazybones, forever idling under her quilt. And they all want to eat rich food, drink sweet stuff and do nothing. Pure gold those lasses! And others have quilts too short for me.'

They burst out laughing, so that the doves flew off the roofs.

'It's true, I'm telling you. I've tried a few and they barely reach up my calf. How would I sleep well in winter? In my boots, or what?'

Kłębowa scolded him for lecherous talk in front of the girls.

'I'm just saying it for a laugh. They say an honest joke don't hurt, even under the quilt.'

But the girls were bristling like turkey hens.

'Ha, look at him – so choosy! ... He'll sit there mocking everyone! If there are too few in Lipce, go look in other villages!' they clamoured.

'There are plenty in Lipce: why, it's easier to find a ripened maid here than a whole zloty. A grosz to seal it and the father's set to toast the contract. If only buyers could be found! The whole village is shaking with Misses squawking, that many of 'em there are! All of 'em at the ready, so that every Saturday in every cottage they're scrubbing 'emself clean, plaiting ribbons into their braids, chasing the hens about the yard to take 'em to the Jew for vodka. By noon they're peeping round the corners to see if anyone's coming from any direction. I've seen some of 'em waving their aprons from the rooftops, shrieking: "To me, Maciuś, to me!" And the mother's chiming: "Kasia first, Maciuś, Kasia! I'll add a little cheese and fifteen eggs to the dowry! Kasia first!"'

So droll was he that the boys fell about with laughter, whereas the Kłab girls raised such an uproar that the old man shouted:

'Quiet, the lot of you! Screeching like crows for rain.'

They did not quieten down at once, so in order to interrupt the jibes, the old man asked:

'Were you there, Mateusz, at the Voyt's scrap?'

'No. They say the Koziols really caught it good.'

'Couldn't have been worse. What a sight they were – terrible! The Voyt let them have it for sure, well!'

'It's all that bread at the village's expense – he frisks about on it.'

'Main thing is, he fears no one. Who'll oppose 'im? Someone else'd pay dearly for a trick like that, but not a hair'll fall from his head. He knows the officials, so he can do whatever he likes in the *powiat* ...'

'Cause you're sheep, letting one like that command you all! He rides roughshod over everyone and lords it over 'em, and they all but kiss his feet!' said Mateusz.

'We chose him so we must mind him.'

'Those who raised him high can bring him down.'

'Don't shout, Mateusz, it'll get about.'

'Let it, then he'll know. Let him try picking on me!'

'Maciej's sick, so who else is there can manage him? Everyone hesitates to take the lead, for each can barely cope with his own troubles,' whispered the old man, getting up from the bench.

The others got up too.

Some went to lie down and rest after eating, some went to stretch their legs on the road and loosen their belts, and the girls went to the pond to wash the dishes, cool down and chatter. Mateusz set about squaring the struts to the house while Kłab lit a pipe and sat on the threshold.

'He that stands up for another, he shall always have much bother!' he muttered, puffing away.

The sun hung directly over the house. The afternoon was growing hotter and a warm breeze blew from the fields. The orchards stood in silence, the trees shimmering in sunlight while the blossom floated gently on to the grass. Bees hummed in the apple trees, the pond glittering through the branches, and even the birds had fallen silent. The sweet sleepiness of afternoon spread over the world.

So as not to doze, Kłab went off to the potato pit.

He puffed hard on his pipe, which was going out, and spat, throwing back the hair falling over his face.

'Have you checked them?' asked his wife, leaning out of the porch.

'Aye ... if we cooked once a day, there'd be enough till the new ones!'

'Ha, once a day! Young and healthy, they need to eat.'

'We won't manage. That many people. Ten mouths and stomachs like quart bottles. Something'll have to be done.'

'Are you thinking of the heifer, eh? I'm telling you now, I won't let her be sold. Do what you like, I won't give up the cow. Just remember that.'

He clapped his hands as though chasing off a tiresome wasp and when she'd gone he lit his pipe again.

'Blast the biddy ... Heifer's not a sacred relic. If need be!'

The sun blazed straight in his eyes, there was little shade as yet, so he merely turned his back and puffed more and more slowly and less often. He loosened his belt, for the potatoes seemed to weigh on his stomach. The sun was roasting, the doves cooed in the thatch and the hushed murmur of leaves all sapped him so that he began to rock and sway.

'Tomasz, Tomasz!'

He opened his eyes; Agata was sitting beside him, peering at him timidly.

'It's a hard time for you before harvest,' she said quietly. 'If you like, I've a little put by. I can lend it you. I had it put away for my burial, but if you're in such need, I can lend it. It's a shame for the heifer. I were there last year when she were born ... good stock, a milker. If the Lord Jesus grants it and I live, you can give it me back come harvest. It's no shame to take from your own kin in need, even for a farmer – take it,' she pushed around three roubles in zlotys into his hand.

'Put it away! I'll manage somehow.'

'Take it. Why I can add half a rouble – take it,' she begged quietly.

'God bless you. Why, how kind you are!'

'Take a round thirty zlotys, then.' She unknotted the bundle, adding a ten. 'Take it,' she whimpered, holding back the tears, her soul rending as though she were unpicking every grosz from inside.

The coins glittered, strangely tempting in the sunshine. He narrowed his eyes with pleasure, rummaging through them, clean and new. Sighing heavily, struggling with a great desire, he finally turned away and whispered:

'Hide 'em well, before someone sees and maybe steals 'em.'

She begged again, quietly, but only for the sake of it, for when he did not answer, she began eagerly to wrap and hide her treasure.

'Why don't you stay with us?' he said after a while.

'Why, there's no work I can help with. I can't even keep up with the goslings. Will I eat for nothing, eh? ... I'm weak, I'm waiting for my time from day to day. Sure, it's nicer to die with kin, nicer ... even in the heifer's old stall ... Aye, but what need have you for such bother and troubles! I have a whole forty zlotys for my burial ... so there can be a Mass ... in the proper way ... eh? ... I'd add the quilt ... Don't you worry, I'll go quiet as quiet, before you know it ... soon ...' she stammered timidly, her heart beating with expectation that he would accept her and say: 'Stay!'

He did not answer, however, as though not understanding these whimpers, but only stretched, yawned and began to slide stealthily round the house towards the barn, to the hay ...

'Such a farmer ... aye ... why would he ... and me but a beggar ...' she sobbed to herself in hushed and pitiful anguish, following him with tear-stained eyes.

Agata trudged slowly away, coughing often and pausing every few steps to sit by the pond. She went as she did every day, to look about the village and see where she might die, in the proper way, without any jiggery-pokery.

Off she went to search for honest folk, drifting around the village like a frail spider's web, which floats not knowing where to hook itself.

Folk mocked her and made fun, advising the poor old thing to stay with her kin, while to the Kłabs, supposedly in friendship, they said:

'She's kin after all, she's got money for her burial and she won't be a guest for long in the house ... Where's she to go?'

All this came to Kłębowa's mind when her husband told her of today's doings with Agata. They'd gone to bed already and when the children had begun to snore, she set to coaxing him quietly:

'We can find a place ... she can lie in the hallway ... the geese can go under the hayrick ... she eats any old thing ... she won't last long ... she's money for a burial ... People'd stop talking ... and then we won't have to give away the quilt ... Aye, you'll not find another like it lying on the roadside,' she argued heatedly.

But Kłab only snored in reply and it was not until the following day that he said:

'If Agata were penniless, I'd take her – too bad, an act of God – but this way they'll say we're doing it for those few zlotys. Why, they're already gossiping that she went begging for us ... We can't.'

And since Kłębowa listened to her husband in all things, she just sighed wistfully over the quilt and went to urge the girls to hurry.

They were to plant cabbages that day.

The day rose like the one before – beautiful, sunlit, almost May-like, but for a wind that had come frolicking and romping about the fields so that the wheat sloshed about like storm-tossed waters. The orchards swayed, souging and shaking down thick showers of blossom, and fragrance wafted from the full heavy sprays of lilac. The bracing air smelled of earth and flowers. Songs rode along the wind from the woodland pastures. Hammers rang in the forge. From early morning, the roads had been full of hubbub and people. The women were heading for the cabbage patches, heaving plants in sieves and baskets, and talking loudly of yesterday's fair and the Voyt's doings.

Very soon, before the dew had dried, the black cabbage strips, marked only by furrows full of water gleaming in the sun, were swarming with red skirts.

Kłębowa and her daughters also made their way thither, while Kłab, Mateusz and the boys got on with bolstering the cottage.

But when the sun began to bake, the old man left the work to his sons, and summoning Balcerek, he set off to visit Boryna.

'Lovely weather, my friend,' said Kląb, taking a little snuff as they walked.

'Grand. As long as it don't scorch overmuch.'

'The rains are passing by on both sides, so they'll not shun us either.'

'Bugs are fair swarming in the trees – sign o' drought.'

'And the vegetables are late, it could burn 'em. Maybe the Lord Jesus won't let it happen. What of the fair? Did you find out anything about the horse?'

'Eh ... I gave the gendarme three roubles, and he gave me promises.'

'There's no security to be had! ... A man lives in constant fear like a hare and nowt to be done.'

'And the Voyt's good as useless,' muttered Balcerek warily.

'We'll have to think on a new one,' retorted Kląb.

Balcerek glanced at him, but the old man added hotly:

'He's bringing shame on the village. Did you hear about yesterday's to-do?'

'Eh ... anyone can get in a fight, no bother ... To my mind, we shouldn't be bearing yet more cost for his time in office.'

'He don't dispose of it himself: there's the cashier minds it, the notary, the council ...'

'Dogs minding the meat! They mind it, and you, the peasant, pay again for their neglect.'

'How else! Have you heard owt new?'

Balcerek only spat and waved his hand; he did not want to talk. The man was taciturn and cowed by his wife, so more inclined to guard his tongue.

They had in any case reached Boryna's.

Józka was scraping potatoes on the porch.

'Go in, Father's lying by himself. Hanusia's at the cabbage field and Jagna's at her mother's.'

It was empty inside. Sprays of lilac looked in through the open window and sunlight filtered through the greenery.

The old man was sitting in bed. He was gaunt and a grey beard bristled on his yellow face like teasels. His head was still bound, and he moved his livid lips a bit.

When they praised God in greeting, he neither replied nor moved.

'Do you not recognize us?' said Kląb, taking his hand.

It was as though he heard nothing, but was simply listening to the chirruping swallows as they moulded a nest under the thatch or the rustle of the branches rubbing against the walls and glancing in at the window.

'Maciej!' Kląb said again, shaking him a little.

The old man shuddered, his eyelids fluttering, and he looked round at them.

'Do you hear? Why it's Kląb, and here's friend Balcerek: do you know us, eh?'

They waited, looking into his eyes.

'I'm alone, men! Here, to me! Beat the bastards, beat 'em!' he shouted in a sudden loud voice, lifted his hands as if in defence and fell back, arms outstretched.

Józka burst in at the shout and began to smother his head in wet cloths, but he lay quiet now, his wide open eyes shining with mortal fear.

They left soon after, troubled and full of dismay.

'That's a corpse lying there, not a living man!' said Kląb, looking back towards the cottage.

Józka was again scraping potatoes on the porch. The children played by the wall, and Witek's stork paraded about the garden. The wind curtained the open window with branches.

They walked on in dread silence, as though they'd stepped out from a grave.

'It comes to each of us, it does,' Kląb whispered, dolefully.

'To each ... God's will, nothing to be done ... Ha, he could have lived some time yet, if not for that wood ...'

'Indeed. He dies while others'll flourish on it,' Kląb said with a sigh.

'You die but once ... Hadn't he laboured hard enough?'

'And we ourselves might follow afore too long.'

They looked hard at the world – at the swaying fields, the distant woods clear as the palm of your hand, the arable fields turning green, at the bright warm spring day – and their souls turned to stone in resignation and submission to the will of God.

'Fate cannot be changed, no ...' And with this, they parted.

Others too, meanwhile, began to visit that day and the days that followed, but the old man recognized none of them, just the same, until in the end they stopped coming.

'All he needs is prayers for a speedy death,' said the priest.

And since everyone had troubles and cares of their own, it was no surprise that they quickly forgot him, and if anyone did remember, it was as though they were recalling a dead man.

True enough, the poor wretch lay in such abandonment that he might have been put in the grave and the grass grown over him.

In whose memory did he reside?

Sometimes it happened that he'd lie whole days without a drop of water, and maybe would have died of hunger had it not been for the good heart of Witek, who snaffled whatever he could lay his hands on and took it to the master, and often he'd milk the cow a little more and feed him the milk. The sick man filled him with strange sorrowful concern, until one day he dared ask the farmhand.

'Pietrek, is it true that if you die without confession, you'll go to hell?'

'True. Why, priest's always saying so at church.'

'So would the master go to hell?' he said, crossing himself fearfully.

'He's a man like any other.'

'Ha! The master a man like any other! Ha!'

'You're stupid as a cabbage heart!' Pietrek said tetchily, and launched upon lengthy explanations, but Witek did not believe it; he knew what he knew and it was something quite different.

And so the days went by in the Boryna cottage ...

Meanwhile, the village seethed like a pot on the boil.

It was the Voyt's brawl had done it, so that both sides now sought witnesses, dragging folk to their side.

Though the case concerned only the Koziols, the Voyt did not rest and was mighty busy in his efforts. He had the upper hand straight off, for over half the village spoke for him. They knew him to be a bad penny, but he was the Voyt after all. He could be helpful in a thing or two, but he could also make a proper nuisance of himself, so with persuasion, flattery and vodka, he secured the witnesses he needed.

Koziol lay gravely ill. They fetched him the priest, who brought the Lord Jesus. Different things they said of this illness, muttering between themselves that he was only pretending, so that the Voyt would catch it at court. But God knows how it was. All they knew for sure was that Kozłowa herself spent whole days running about, raging and denouncing. She said she'd already sold her sow and piglets to pay for her husband's medicine and almost every day she ran out in front of the Voyt's house on purpose, shouting to the rooftops that Bartek was dying, calling on God for deliverance and fair-minded folk to witness.

The village poor and the more tender-hearted women took their side, and even one of the smaller farmers, Kobus, who was an irascible, quarrelsome type. But the rest didn't want to hear, denied they'd seen a thing, right to her face, and many even advised her not to mess with the Voyt as nothing would come of it.

New skirmishes sprang up, since Kobus had an unbridled tongue, resorted easily to his fists, and nor did the women mince words.

So more rumpus and anger was all it led to – how could it be otherwise? Could they get the better of the farmers and the Voyt?

Even the Jew laughed at them and would not give them credit.

Before a week had gone by, everyone had had enough of the business, of the hue and cry, and stopped listening.

Until new help arrived at the Koziols' door and new turmoil erupted in the village.

For here was Płoszka conspiring with the miller and together, openly and loudly, they took the Koziols' side ... Aye, they cared as much for them as for last year's snow – they had their own designs and interests in mind.

Płoszka was a mightily ambitious peasant, secretive and assured of his own cleverness and wealth, while it was well known that the miller, a skinflint and extortioner, would willingly hang for a grosz.

A secret, bitter war soon commenced between the two, however, though to people's faces they still made a show of friendship, greeting each other as before and often even going to the inn arm in arm.

The wiser soon remarked that this partnership had no concern with justice, nor the injury to the Koziols, but something else, perhaps the post of Voyt.

'One has grazed his fill, let others do the same!' the old folk said, shaking their heads. And so time went by, the mayhem in the village growing all the while.

And then one day the news spread:

'Germans stopping at the inn!'

'They're surely off to Podlesie,' someone conjectured.

'Let them go with God! ... What's it to you?' someone else replied.

But uneasy, troubled curiosity took hold of folk. They shouted the news to each other across the orchards and stood in the farmyards talking of it, while others were already on their way to the inn to find out more.

True enough, five brithckas stood in the approach to the inn. All with iron axles, painted yellow and blue, they were covered in linen canopies from under which women peered out, sitting among sundry farming tools. Inside the inn, ten Germans were drinking at the bar.

Sturdy and bearded, dressed in navy capotes with silver chains on their fat stomachs, they were doughty rogues and their mugs fair shone with good food. They were jabbering away with the Jews.

The peasants stood all together in a group alongside and shouted for vodka, watching and listening carefully, but it was hard to make out even a single word. Finally Mateusz, who knew how to jabber with the Jews too, sprechened² something that made the innkeeper turn round, amazed. The Germans flashed looks at each other but said nothing, so then Grzela, the Voyt's brother, said a few words in German to them. Turning their backs on the villagers, they just guffawed among themselves, like swine at a trough.

'Those pigs need a punch in the mug!' Mateusz said, angered.

'Tickle their sides with a stick, then they'll speak.'

And young Adam Kłab whispered impulsively:

'I'll shove that 'un at the end in the belly. If he knocks me down, give him one back.'

They restrained him, for the Germans, as though sensing a threat, took the cask of beer and quickly made off from the inn.

'Oi, knickerbockers, not so fast, you'll lose your trews!'

'Swine's cousins!' the peasants shouted after them.

But right after they'd left, the Jew confessed to the farmhands that the Germans had practically bought Podlesie. They had already gone to measure out the place for a colony and a whole fifteen families would settle at the grange.

'We're squashed on our strips, and the Germans are going to spread out on hundreds of morgen.'

'Outbid 'em, then, and don't let 'em! Use your head, if you think you're that clever!' Stacho Płoszka yelled at Grzela.

'Damn this business!' Mateusz swore, banging his fist on the counter. 'If they settle at Podlesie, it'll be hard to stick it out in Lipce,' he asserted, since he'd been about a bit and he knew Germans well.

They did not believe him immediately, but the whole village was perturbed and began to ponder and weigh up what ill could come of such a neighbour for Lipce.

And here, every day, herders and passers-by were reporting that at Podlesie they were measuring out the land already, carting stone, digging a well.

Many a one went off beyond the mill towards Wola out of curiosity and to check with their own eyes if it were true. But as things stood, it was impossible to find out. They pressed the blacksmith, for he'd got a sniff of the Germans already, having shoed their horses, but he beat about the bush, telling them neither one thing nor the other.

At last Grzela, the Voyt's brother, set off to get to the bottom of it.

It was like this: the squire owed one of the Germans fifteen thousand roubles. As he couldn't return it, the other wanted to take Podlesie to cover the debt and pay for the rest in cash. The squire appeared willing, but in fact was on the lookout for other buyers, for the German was giving only sixty roubles a morgen. The squire was delaying as best he could.

'But he'll have to agree! The manor's full o' Jews and each one clamouring for his debt! The woodsman told me that the cows are already marked for tax. Where's he going to find the money? Everything's sold in advance! As for the wood, they won't let him cut it while there's a lawsuit. He cannot manage otherwise, and sell he must, at any old price,' declared Grzela.

'Such land, a hundred roubles a morgen wouldn't be overmuch.'

'Buy it. He'll sell and kiss your hand besides.'

'Ha, a pretty penny when you haven't got it!'

'Germans'll live it up, and you, boy, swallow your spit!'

So they talked, sighing mournfully. Gloom settled upon them. Aye, what a shame it was, such land, fertile and right beside theirs. Each of them could have done with a few morgen, each and every one. Why, they were jostling on their strips like ants; why, they could barely manage from one harvest to the next. Such a chunk of choice land would be perfect for their sons and sons-in-law. They'd build a new village with fine meadows and water nearby ... but no, couldn't be done! The Germans had got in, would soon start lording it, and you, brother, go die in a ditch.

'Where'll they go, all of 'em?' they said with a sigh, thinking of the young folk, loitering about the lanes in the evenings. There were plenty of them, plenty, the cottages were bursting at the seams! And who had money to buy land, when there was barely enough to get by?

They puzzled endlessly, and even went to the priest for advice. He could not give it: he could pour nothing from an empty jug.

'There's no dipping the toe without dough. The poor man's always got the wind in his eyes!'

But complaining and lamenting didn't help either.

And to top it all, the heatwaves grew more frequent. May was barely coming to an end and it was scorching as July. The days dawned quiet and sultry. In the east, the sun was fiery from its very rising into a clear sky and baked the higher land and sandy soil so that the vegetables wilted yellow. It seared the fallow grass. Streams ran dry, while the spindly stalks of potatoes, though off to a good start, now barely covered the ground. Only the winter crops had escaped greater damage. With heavy heads and beautifully grown, they were still shooting higher and so tall that they blocked out the cottages, which crouched to the ground, with only their roofs visible above the spiky forest.

The nights, too, were stifling and so humid that folk were sleeping in the orchards as it was unbearable inside.

What with the heat, the troubles and woes, Płoszka's incitements against the Voyt, and the preharvest days much harder than in years gone by, it was a strangely quarrelsome and restless time in Lipce.

Everyone was irritable, just waiting for a chance to needle someone with a painful word or to grab them by the collar. Each readily opposed the other, so that the village became a living hell. Every day the place was flying with insults and quarrels from dawn to dusk, for every day brought something new. Be it the Kobuses fighting, so that the priest had to scold them and make peace, or Balcerkowa and Gulbas rumpling each other's hair over a piglet that had dug up the carrots, or Płoszkowa scrapping with the Soltys over mixed-up goslings, or disputes over children, neighbours causing damage, or any old thing simply to badger and squabble and yell insults at the top of their voices, it was as if a blight had fallen upon the village, so many clashes, fights and lawsuits were there.

Even Ambrozcy joked to strangers:

'A fine time of scarcity the Lord Jesus has given this year! No one's dead, no one's giving birth, no one's marrying, yet every day someone's standing me a drink, shows me respect and asks me for a witness. A few more years o' this quarrelling and a man'd be drunk to his gills ...'

Aye, things were bad in Lipce.

But in Dominikowa's cottage, happen things were worst of all.

Szymek came back with the others, Jędrzych recovered and, unlike elsewhere, they were not troubled by want, so things should have gone on as before. Far from it, when the boys refused to obey their mother! Digging in their heels, arguing tooth and nail and not allowing themselves to be beaten, they would not touch any of the women's work they'd done in the past.

'Get yourself a lass or do it yourself,' they said firmly.

Dominikowa had an iron hand and a relentless soul – but of course! All these years, she had ruled; all these years no one had dared contradict or oppose her. And who was it opposing her now? Who had the nerve? Her own children!

'Merciful Jesus!' she cried out in anger and frustration for the slightest reason and, snatching up her stick against her sons, tried to compel their obedience by force. Refusing to give in, they became as stubborn as their mother and so were at loggerheads. Then such shouts and pursuits round the cottage ensued each day that people would come running to calm them down.

Even the priest, though probably at Dominikowa's instigation, summoned them and exhorted them to be obedient and peaceable. They listened patiently, kissing his hands and humbly embracing his knees as was fitting, but did not change one bit.

'We're not children. We know what we're meant to do. Let Mother back down first!' they argued to people. 'The whole village is laughing at us ...'

And Dominikowa turned quite yellow with anger and vexation, for they would not be compelled in any way. Instead of sitting about in church or with her friends as before, she now had work on the farm to do, and was forever calling on Jagna for help. But nor did her daughter spare her shame and annoyance, for Dominikowa was on the side of the Voyt's wife. She even testified against the Koziols since she'd been at the fight and had bound their wounds.

Piotr too often looked in of an evening, seemingly for advice, but mainly to get Jagusia to come outside and stroll the garden with him.

Nothing can be hidden in a village; everyone knows full well where the dust is flying and why, so indignation at this sinful romancing grew greater and greater and more than once had good folk warned the old woman.

What could she do, when Jagna, despite pleas and begging, carried on as though out of spite? She preferred the worst of sins and human slander to sitting endlessly in that loathsome cottage of her husband's. Evil had snatched her up and borne her away, and all were powerless to stop it.

This played into Hanka's hands too, and she even talked of it openly.

'Let her amuse herself till they stop the Voyt from dipping his hands in the community's pot. Why, he denies her nothing and brings back whatever he can from town. He'd have set her in gold if he could. Let them have their fun. What's it to me!'

For did she not have worries of her own eating away at her! She did not begrudge money for the lawyer, and there was still no knowing when Antek's case would be heard and what awaited him. And there was the poor thing, withering away in the slammer, awaiting God's mercy. In the house, too, things were slowly coming apart. Could she mind everything? The farmhand was growing more and more impudent, egged on by the blacksmith, so that he did as he pleased. Sometimes when she went off to town, he spent the whole day loitering about the village. She'd threaten him afterwards that, let Antek but return, he would quickly deal with Pietrek.

'Return! They've not yet stooped to letting thugs free!' Pietrek would retort insolently. She fair shook with anger, itching to smack that wicked mouth, but how would that help? He might even defy her, and who would stand up for her and support her? She had to bear it all and save it for later, for the right time, or he'd leave and everything would fall on her shoulders; she could barely manage the work as it was. As a result, her health was breaking down constantly. After all, rust will devour iron in the end, and a stone will endure for only so long, so what could a weak woman do!

One day towards the end of May, the priest and organist were away for the indulgences, and Ambrozy had got so drunk with the Germans, who often looked in at the inn, that there was no one to ring the Angelus bell or open the church.

So they proceeded to hold the service by the graveyard where a small wayside shrine with a statue of the Mother of God stood by the gate. Every May, the girls dressed it in paper ribbons and a golden crown and scattered it with meadow flowers,⁵ keeping it from complete ruin, since the shrine was ancient, full of cracks and falling into disrepair. Even the birds no longer nested in it, and only sometimes, during foul autumn weather, might some herdsman seek shelter there. The cemetery trees – ancient lindens and slender birches – and the bent crosses shielded it a little from winter storms and gales.

Quite a few folk had gathered. Quick as they could, they dressed the shrine in greenery and flowers, someone swept away the rubbish, someone sprinkled yellow sand about, and, having stuck candles and lights at the feet of the figure, they knelt down devoutly.

Kneeling at the threshold to the shrine, swathed in tulips and pink hawthorn, the blacksmith was first to start singing.

The sun had long since gone down and it was growing gloomy. The sky in the west was still ablaze – all in gold with the palest powdering of green. In the quiet, the drooping plaits of birches spilled to the ground while the wheat leaned in, listening to the resonant babble of the little river and the faint chirping of grasshoppers.

The last herds were trailing back to the byres; from the village, fields and hidden baulks rose the shrill song of a herdsman and long, drawn-out bellowing. Meanwhile, the folk sang, gazing at the bright face of the Holy Mother as she stretched out her hands in blessing over the whole world:

*'Good night, fragrant Lily,
Good night!'*

The scent of young birches wafted from the graveyard. Nightingales too began to open their throats, drawing out a broken note and gathering force, until at last they erupted in a frothing golden torrent, spilling pearly trills, marvellous warbling and those beloved yearning lamentations. Not far away, from the wheatfields, Pan Jacek's fiddle replied, accompanying the folk so sweetly, quietly and poignantly, as though rusty ears of rye were ringing against each other and the dry earth and golden sky were singing their Maytime song.

And now they were all singing together, people, birds and fiddle, and when they paused fleetingly, carried away like the nightingales, so that all grew quiet for a moment, and the strings of the fiddle seemed to catch their breath, a countless choir of frogs raised their raucous voices and croaked compliantly, urging them on.

And so they chanted in turn.

The service stretched on, until the blacksmith began to hurry it along. He roared loudly, drowning out the others, and often called behind him, 'Step lively, people ...' when some were late with the note.

And once he even yelled at Maciuś Kłab:

'Stop bellowing, you oaf – you're not fetching cows!'

Now keeping time and singing together, the voices picked up and, slowly circling like a flock of doves, rose up into the darkening sky.

*'Good night, fragrant Lily!
Good night!
Immaculate Mary!
Good night!'*

The dark had thickened and the warm night and quiet world enfolded them. In the sky, stars appeared, glistening like dew, as people began to depart.

The girls, arms around each other's waists, wandered along the lanes.

Grave and deep in thought, Hanka was returning on her own with only the baby in her arms when the blacksmith slipped next to her and walked alongside.

She did not speak, but right by the house, seeing him still there, she said:

'Are you coming in, Michal?'

'I'll sit a moment on the porch and tell you something,' he whispered quietly.

She stiffened somewhat, preparing herself to hear some new woe.

'Seems you were at Antek's,' he began.

'I was, but they didn't let me see him.'

'I was afraid of that.'

'Tell me what you know!' A chill ran through her.

'What I know? ... Only what I managed to drag out of the gendarme.'

'But what?' Leaning against a post, she pressed the child closer.

'He said they wouldn't let Antek out before the case.'

'But why!' she could barely stammer, in a sudden fit of shaking. 'Why, the lawyer said they might let him go.'

'Ha, so that he could run away! They'll not let him out for anything! You know, I came today out of pure friendship. What's past is past between us. You'll see some day that I was right ... You didn't believe me ... as you please ... but listen now to what I have to say, and it's the truth, as though I were in the priest's confessional ... Things are bad with Antek! They'll surely sentence him hard, maybe ten years. Do you hear?'

'I hear, and I don't believe a word of it.' She was suddenly calm.

'Seeing's believing, I'm telling you the truth.'

'As you always do,' she said, laughing scornfully.

He was affronted and began assuring her heatedly that he'd come out of friendship now, pure and simple, to advise her. She listened, her eyes wandering over the farmyard. Several times she'd risen impatiently: the cows were bellowing from the byre unmilked, the geese had not been brought in for the night and the colt was racing round the farmyard with Łapa while the boys were bantering in the barn. She did not believe a single word. Let him talk; maybe he'd give himself away with what he'd really come for, she thought, staying alert.

'What's to do then, what?' she replied, for something to say.

'Well a solution could be found.' He lowered his voice still more.

She turned to face him.

'Bail him out, then they'll release him before the hearing. Something can be managed after that, even if it's to Hamerica⁶ ... They won't chase after him ...'

'Jesus, Mary! Hamerica!' she cried unwittingly.

'Quiet. I swear, that's what the squire advised. Let him run away – he says – or it's ten years at the very least. The man'll be ruined ... Yesterday he said so.'

'Run away, from the village ... the land ... the children ... Jesus ...' That much she'd understood.

'Just pay the bail, then Antek can decide the rest, just pay it ...'

'Where am I supposed to get it? ... My God, leave ... far from everything.'

'Five hundred roubles they want! You've got Father's money after all ... take it for the bail ... we'll settle up later ... but let's save him ...'

She leapt to her feet.

'The dog's barking to the same old tune!' She made to leave.

'You flounce about like a fool.' He was angry. 'I meant nothing by it ... Ha, here's you picking on every word, while there's a man sitting in prison. I'll tell him what efforts you're making to help matters.'

She sat down again, not knowing now what to think.

He went on at length about that Hamerica, of people he'd known who'd gone there, how they wrote letters, even sent money back to their own. How good it was there, how everyone had their rights, what riches they'd gathered. Antek could run away immediately: he knew a Jew who'd got more than one person out. Hadn't many such escaped already! Then Hanka could join him later, to throw off the scent. When Grzela got back from the army, he could pay her out of the patrimony, or if not, a buyer could quickly be found.

'Ask the priest, you'll see he'll confirm my words. You'll realize that I'm right and speak from a sincere heart, not for my own convenience. But not a breath to anyone, so that the gendarmes get no wind of it, for then they'll not let him go even for a thousand, but have him in chains instead,' he ended gravely.

'But where to get that much money,' she groaned.

'I know someone in Modlica who'd give it at a good percentage ... I know others ... the money could be found ... Leave it to me ... I can help.'

And a long time he advised and persuaded.

'Think on it, you must decide quickly.'

He left quietly, so that she barely noticed him vanish into the night.

It was late. They were sleeping in the house. Only Witek sat by the wall as though guarding the mistress. In the village, everyone had gone to bed. Even the dogs weren't barking. All that could be heard was the water gurgling and the birds sobbing in the orchards. The moon rolled up the sky, cutting across those terrible dark heights like a silver sickle. Low white mists covered the meadows and a tawny cloud of pollen hung above the rye. The pond shone through the trees like a sheet of ice ... until the stillness and the nightingales' trilling and ululation made the ears ring.

'Jesus, to run away from the village, the land, everything!' she thought over and over.

She was overcome with horror, which grew by the minute, and her heart contracted with terrible grief and dismay.

Lapa began to howl in the yard. The nightingales fell silent. A wind rose, making the shadows waver with a sad moan.

'He's seen Kuba's soul!' whispered Witek, crossing himself fearfully.

'Idiot!' she scolded him, chasing him off to sleep.

'When he comes, he looks in on the horses, gives 'em more feed ... and not only the once ...'

She wasn't listening now. Silence again descended on the world, the nightingales took up their song, and she sat as though frozen, repeating in fear and misery:

'Run away into the wide world! For ever! Merciful Jesus! For ever ...'

CHAPTER 9

It was Whitsuntide and the May greenery decorating the cottages had not yet wilted when, early one morning, Rocho turned up unexpectedly. He did not appear in the village until after Mass and a long conversation with the priest. There were but few people hanging about the farmsteads as it was the time for earthing up potatoes, but when news spread that Rocho was passing through the village, first one then another quickly hurried into the road to greet him after not seeing him for so long.

Here he came, the same as ever, leaning on his stick, slowly, head held high, in the same grey capote, and the rosaries around his neck just as before. The wind ruffled his grey hair and his gaunt face shone with strange kindness and merriment.

He cast his eyes over the cottages and orchards, smiling joyfully at everything, with a special greeting for each person, and even genially stroked the heads of the children who gathered around him. He was first to hail the women, so glad was he to find everything as it once had been.

'I was in Częstochowa for the indulgences,' he said when they pressed him, curious to know where he'd been all this time.

Such was the rejoicing at his return that they began to tell him all the Lipce news right there on the road. Already someone was asking for advice, while another wanted to complain, taking him to one side and extracting their troubles to show him, like a grosz put away for a rainy day.

'I am utterly exhausted, I'll rest for today,' he explained, fending them off.

They jostled to invite him to their cottages to stay.

'I'll stay with Maciej for now. I've already promised Hanka. And if someone invites me after that, I'll stay for longer.'

And he set off briskly for Boryna's.

Hanka was overjoyed to see him and immediately set to looking after her guest, but as soon as he'd put down his bags and caught his breath a little, he wanted to find the old man.

'Go see him – it's that hot inside, he's lying in the orchard. I'll boil you some milk while you do, and maybe you'd like some eggs? Eh?'

But Rocho was already in the orchard and furtively picking his way under the branches to the sick man, who lay in a cart-basket, spread with a quilt and covered in a sheepskin. Curled in a ball at his feet, Łapa was watching over him, while Witek's stork strutted comically between the trees as though on patrol.

The orchard was old and dim. The little trees had grown so dense they blocked out the sky, so that only a few rays of sunlight managed to fumble their way, like golden spiders, to the grass below.

Maciej lay on his back. The swaying branches murmured quietly above him in rippling shadows, rent now and then by a gust of wind that unveiled a piece of blue sky and allowed the sun to splash into his eyes.

Rocho sat down beside him.

The trees rustled, the dog growled at the flies now and then, and sometimes a twittering swallow would flit between the black trunks towards the billowing green fields.

The sick man suddenly turned towards him.

'Do you recognize me, Maciej, eh? Do you?'

A faint smile flitted over Boryna's face, his eyelids fluttered and he began to move his blue lips, but no sound emerged.

'If the Lord wills, you might still be well.'

Boryna seemed to have understood, since he shook his head and seemed to turn unwillingly away. He stared again at the waving branches and the splashes of sunlight that flooded his eyes from time to time.

Rocho sighed, made the sign of the cross over him and went.

'Don't you think Father seems a little better?' asked Hanka.

He considered some time before he said in a quiet grave voice:

'A lamp flares a little stronger towards the end, before it goes out. It seems to me that Maciej is coming closer to it ... I find it strange that he's still living: why he's shrivelled as wood shavings ...'

'When he won't eat a thing, not even milk sometimes.'

'You must be ready for it, any day.'

'Yes, for sure, my God, for sure. Ambrozy said the same yesterday, and even that we should not wait, but order the coffin.'

'Get it made, there won't be long to wait, no ... When a soul is keen to leave the world nothing can stop it, not even tears, or some would still be with us for centuries on end,' he said sadly, applying himself to the milk that she'd prepared for him. Drinking slowly, he enquired what had been happening in the village.

She repeated what he'd heard already along the way from other people, then began to enlarge broadly and eagerly upon her own troubles too.

'How is Józka?' he interrupted impatiently.

'In the field, earthing the potatoes with the hired hands and Jagustynka. Pietrek's gone to the forest: he's carting wood for Stacho for the cottage.'

'They're building?'

'Why, Pan Jacek gave him ten old pines.'

'Gave? They were telling me something of it, but I didn't believe it.'

'It's unbelievable, that's why! No one believed it at first. He promised, but there's many a one makes a promise. Promises, promises, and the fool rejoices – they say. But Pan Jacek gave Stacho a letter and said to come with him to the squire. Even Weronka was against him going, for why should he wear out his shoes for nothing, she said ... They'll just mock him, to boot, for believing a fool ... But Stacho insisted and went. And he says that, in maybe a prayer after handing over the letter, the squire had him summoned to the rooms, offered him vodka and said: "Come with your carts and the woodsman will mark out ten trunks for you ..." Kłab gave him horses, as did the Soltys, and I gave him Pietrek. The squire were waiting in the glade already and he himself then chose the slenderest of the ones they'd cut for the Jews in the winter. Well, now they're carting 'em back, for it'll take thirty cartloads, with the branches. Stacho'll make a fine house! Goes without saying how he thanked Pan Jacek and apologized, for everyone had him for a beggar and a fool, that there was no knowing what he lived on, and that he played his fiddle by the holy figures and in the wheat, and then he says something odd or out of the blue, like someone not right in the head ... And him such a gentleman and the squire does what he says! Who'd have believed it before?'

'Look not at the man, but his works.'

'But to give so much wood, which Mateusz reckons is worth about a thousand zlotys, and just for the thanks, that's unheard of!'

'They say he's taking the old cottage to live out his days ...'

'Ha, it's worth as much as this old shoe! Folk did wonder if there were not some trickery afoot in all this kindness, so that Weronka even asked the priest's advice. He scolded her – said she were stupid.'

'Truly. Accept if someone's giving and thank God for his mercy.'

'When a body's not used to taking what's free, and from squires at that! Did you ever hear the like! When did anyone give a peasant anything out o' kindness? If you go for the smallest bit of advice, they're glancing at your hands to see what you've brought for it, and don't even show your face to an official without a grosz or two, or they'll ask you to come back tomorrow or in a week's time ... I've come to know very well how things stand in the world through Antek's matter and many a coin I've carried out o' the house ...'

'That's good you reminded me of Antek. I've been to town.'

'Did you see him perhaps?'

'There was no time.'

'I were there not long ago. They wouldn't let me in. God knows when I'll see him.'

'It might be sooner than you think,' he said with a smile.

'Jesus, what are you saying!'

'It's true! They told me at the headquarters that they might let Antek go free before the hearing if someone can vouch for it that he won't run away, or if they give the court a pledge of five hundred roubles.'

'Just as the blacksmith said! She began to tell him every word of the advice.'

'It's good advice, but since it comes from Michal, it's dangerous: he'll have some gain in it, he will ... Don't rush to sell: a man leaves the land on a stallion and returns crawling, on all fours ... Some other way must be found ... maybe someone could lend it? ... You must ask about among people ... Aye, if there were some money ...'

'Maybe there is,' she whispered more quietly. 'I have some, only I haven't managed to count it. Maybe it would be enough ...'

'Show me – we'll count it together.'

She disappeared somewhere, and returning after a prayer or so, she closed the door and bolted it and put a bundle on his knee.

There was paper money there and silver and even a few zlotys and six strands of beads.

'They were Mother's. He gave 'em to Jagna, and then looks like he took 'em back,' she whispered, crouching by the bench where Rocho was counting.

'Four hundred and two roubles and five zlotys! From Maciej, eh?'

'Yes ... aye ... He gave them me after Easter ...' she stammered, blushing.

'It's not enough for the pledge. Perhaps you could sell some of the livestock?'

'Aye, I could sell the sow ... The barren cow too – she's not needed, the Jew has already been asking about her ... A few bushels of wheat ...'

'You see, grain by grain and a measure will be gathered. We'll buy Antek out with no one's help. Does anyone know about this money of yours?'

'Father gave it me to rescue Antek, telling me not to breathe a word to anyone. You're the first I'm telling. If Michal ...'

'I won't tell, be at peace. When they say it's time, I'll go with you for Antek. It will work out for the good, it will, my dear,' he whispered, kissing her on the head, for she had thrown herself at his feet in thanks.

'A born father could not be better,' she cried tearfully.

'Your husband will return, so thank God for it. Where is Jagusia?'

'Why at dawn she was off to town already with her mother and the Voyt. They say to the notary, for the old woman's signing everything over to the daughter.'

'Everything to Jagna? And the boys?'

'Out of anger towards 'em, for wanting their portions. It's hell at theirs, not a day goes by without quarrels, whereas the Voyt defends Dominikowa. He was guardian to those poor children, after Dominik's death.'

'Ah, I thought it was some other matter. I've been told all kinds of things.'

'Then you've been told God's truth: he attends only to Jagna, but I'm ashamed to tell just how. The old man's still wheezing and there's her behaving like a bitch ... I won't repeat with who, but I've caught 'em myself in the orchard, and ...'

'Show me where I can rest,' he interrupted her, getting up from the bench.

She wanted to make up Józka's bed for him, but he preferred to go to the barn.

'Hide the money well,' he warned her again and went.

Not appearing again until after noon, he ate dinner and was about to set off for the village, when Hanka spoke up, with great diffidence:

'Won't you help me dress the altar, Rocho ...'

'True, it's Corpus Christi tomorrow.² Where do you put it?'

'In front o' the porch, same as every year. Pietrek'll be back from the woods any time now – he's fetching some fir branches and spruce – and just after dinner I sent Jagustynka and Józka off for greenery for wreaths.'

'And candles, do you have candlesticks already?'

'Ambrozio promised to bring some from church first thing in the morning.'

'Who else is making an altar?'

'The Voyt on our side, and over on the other there's the miller and one at the Płoszkas.'

'I'll help you. I'll just look in on Pan Jacek and be back before dusk.'

'Tell Weronka to come first thing and help!'

He nodded his head and went straight to Stacho's cottage.

Pan Jacek was sitting on the doorstep, as always, smoking a cigarette and plucking at his beard as he gazed at the rolling wheat and watched the birds.

In front of the cottage, meanwhile, under the cherry trees lay several sturdy firs and a heap of tree crowns and branches. Old Bylica was busy measuring with his axe handle. Lopping off a knot here and there, he muttered constantly:

'And you've come to our yard too ... aye ... You're a fine one, I can see ... God bless ... Mateusz will soon put a sharp edge on you ... You'll make a grand sill-beam ... It'll be nice and dry for you ... never you fear ...'

'It's as though he's speaking to a living person,' Rocho whispered in surprise.

'Sit down. The joy has turned his head – he spends whole days like this, by the trees. Listen.'

'Ah, you've done your time standing in the forest, poor thing, now you can rest ... aye, no one'll touch you!' the old man went on, stroking the flaking yellow bark of a pine with loving hands.

Clambering to the thickest trunk toppled on the path, he squatted at its end, and gazing with pleasure at its yellow rings, swollen with resin, he mumbled:

'Such a giant and they managed you! Eh? The Jews would have taken you off to town, but the Lord Jesus let you stay with your own, with farmers. They'll hang pictures from you, the priest'll sprinkle you with holy water, aye ... eh?'

Pan Jacek just smiled and, with a word or two to Rocho, put his fiddle under his arm and set off along the verge towards the woods.

Rocho then sat with Weronka, listening to all manner of news.

Evening was approaching, the heat had abated and chilly gusts were coming in from the meadows. The wind had been up since noon, sending the fields, rusty with young ears of rye, rolling like water. They'd surge violently from time to time, reeling and gushing towards the road and verges, as though ready to spill over at any moment, but then they'd beat their tawny manes against the ground and fall back like a herd of rearing colts. The wind charged at them from all directions, tossing them as though in play, so that, whipped up again, they romped about, the flaxen rippling strips, full of green troughs and rusty drifts, rustling and fluttering. The skylarks' song rang high above and sometimes a flock of crows crossed overhead, hovering on the wind before plunging to rest on the swaying trees. The sun was turning crimson now as it descended ever lower over the world, the red glare of the fading day spilling over the waving fields and the orchards rampaging like a captive herd.

Tomorrow was a feast day and people were leaving the fields early. The women were winding wreaths³ in front of the cottages and the children fetching armfuls of sweet flag. A stack of birches and spruces were piled in front of the Płoszkas and the miller's and being fixed in place for the altars, whose sides the girls were already decorating. They also evened out the road in places, filling in the holes. A woman was still doing her laundry at the pond, her stick slapping away, making the geese honk in alarm.

Rocho was just about to leave Weronka's when someone appeared in a great cloud of dust on the poplar road, charging along on a horse. He was held up somewhat by the carts with Stach's wood and had to ride round on the field.

'Oi! You're that urgent, you'll lame your horse!' they shouted.

Bypassing them somehow, he tore towards the village at full speed, so that the horse's spleen rattled.

'Hey! Adam, wait!' Rocho called to the rider.

Young Kłab slowed down a little and began shouting at the top of his voice:

'Didn't you know, some folk are lying dead in the wood! Jesus, you could've knocked me down. I were grazing the horse on the meadow and me and Gulbas were just leaving for home when right in front of the Boryna cross the horse throws himself to one side, so that I topple on to the ground. I look: what the heck has frightened the horse? And I see some people lying in the junipers ... I call to 'em, and nothing. They're lying there like dead 'uns ...'

'Idiot, spreading stupid stories!' they yelled.

'Go see for yourselves. They're lying there! Gulbas saw 'em too, only he were that scared he tore off into the woods to the hired hands who were fetching firewood. They're lying there dead.'

'Name of the Father and Son, go and tell the Voyt, then!'

'Voyt's not back from town yet,' someone said.

'The Soltys, then! ... He's mending the road with the lads near the blacksmith's!' they called after him, for Adam had set off at a gallop again.

Aye, the news of the murder spread round the village and a horrified clamour erupted, with folk crossing themselves in consternation. Before the sun went down, half the village had emerged on to the road. Someone had told the priest, so that he came out in front of the presbytery to question them. A large group were heading out there already, conferring quietly, the youngest running ahead on the poplar road, and all of them waiting with some impatience for the Soltys, who had gone by cart, taking Kłab and some farmhands with him.

They waited a long time, for he didn't return until twilight, and – to considerable astonishment – in the Voyt's brithcka and horses. He seemed pretty angry too, for he was cursing soundly and clipping the nags, with no intention of pausing in front of the crowd, but as someone caught hold of the horses by the bridle, he had to stop.

'Damn those boys, dreaming nonsense up for the fun of it,' he declared. 'There was no one dead in the forest, just people sleeping under the bushes. Wait till I get my hands on young Kłab. I met the Voyt along the road and got a lift with him. There's the whole story. Giddy up!'

'What, is the Voyt ill, lying there like a sheep?' asked someone, looking into the cart.

'He's tired, that's all! He flicked the horses and was off at a trot.

'Those little bastards, making that up!'

'It's young Gulbas's doing – he's always first with the pranks!'

'They need a strap taking to 'em, scaring folk to no purpose!'

Denouncing them with indignation, they slowly dispersed among the cottages.

Here and there, groups were still standing by the pond, which glowed red in the sunset, when the hired hands appeared with heavy loads of firewood on their backs. Kozłowa came first, fair doubled under the weight, and seeing the people, she leaned her burden against a tree.

'Soltys tricked you good and proper!' she said, wheezing with exhaustion. 'There were no one dead in the forest, true, but maybe something worse.'

Since more people had gathered, drawn by her voice, she gave free rein to her tongue:

'We were coming back along the woodland lane to the cross, and here's Gulbas charging towards us, scared stiff and shouting: "Sommat dead's lying under the junipers!" If it's dead, it's dead, I think, but it's always worth taking a look. On we go ... and from far off, true: some people lying like they're dead ... just their pins stretched out from under the junipers. Filipka's tugging at me to run ... Grzelowa's yammering her prayers already, and such a chill runs down my spine, but I cross myself, I come closer ... I look ... and it's Mr Voyt lying there without his capote, and at his side – Jagusia Borynowa ... sleeping like babes. They'd got drunk together. It were hot, so they went to take a little rest in the cool and get friendly. And reeking of vodka! We didn't wake 'em: let witnesses come, let the whole village see what's going on! Disgrace to say the state she were in – Filipka covered her with her apron out o' pity. Sodom, it were. I'm an old woman and I've never heard of such depravity. Soltys soon arrived and wakes 'em up. Jagna runs off into the field and they could barely hoist Mr Voyt on to the cart, he were drunk as a swine!'

'Jesus, there's never been such a thing in Lipce,' groaned someone.

'If it were a farmhand with a lass, but a farmer, the father of children, and Voyt!'

'And Boryna at death's door, no one to pass him a drink of water, and her ...'

'I'd banish her from the village! I'd tan her hide in front of the church!' Kozłowa began shrieking again.

'Depravity declares itself; what's there to add?' The women calmed her, wringing their hands.

'And where's Dominikowa?'

'Left her behind in town, so's she couldn't hinder 'em ...'

'Jesus, you shudder to think what goes on in the world!'

'Such a sin, such depravity – why, it brings shame on all the village!'

'Jagna don't care about disgrace, she'd do the same tomorrow.'

In every cottage they complained, wringing their hands, so that the more tender among the women began to cry at the outrage and the horror, expecting some stern punishment from God to fall on all the people. The whole village was aquiver with idle talk and lamentation.

Only the lads, who'd gathered on the bridge, began cross-questioning young Gulbas and making fun of the whole episode.

'The Voyt – what a cock, hey! A right blade!' the Wachnik's Adam said with a laugh.

'He'll do penance yet for his romancing: his wife'll rip his head off!'

'And won't let him near her for six months.'

'He won't be in a hurry for her after Jagusia.'

'Dammit, who'd not risk everything for Jagna ...'

'Oh aye! The woman's a picture, you'll not find a greater beauty in any manor: she's only got to look at you and you get the shivers.'

'Sweet as honey. I'm not surprised that Antek Boryna ...'

'Give over, lads! Gulbas tells one set of fibs, Kozłowa another, and the village biddies add their bit out of envy, so who knows what the truth of it is ... She'll not be the first they've dragged over the coals, even the most honest among 'em,' Mateusz began in a sad and greatly dejected voice, but he did not finish, since Grzela, the Voyt's brother, now appeared among them.

'What, Piotr still sleeping?' the more curious questioned him.

'He's my brother born, though anyone behaving that way is a dog to me from this day on! But that scum – she's to blame for everything!' he exploded in a rage.

'Not true!' yelled Pietrek, Boryna's farmhand, pushing his way through to Grzela, fists up. 'Anyone who says so is lying like a dog!'

They listened, astounded, at this unexpected defence, while he, shaking his fists, shouted:

'The Voyt alone's to blame! Did she bring him beads? Did she drag him to the inn? She was the one lurking in the orchard all night, was she? I know well how he coaxed and tempted her! Or maybe he gave her something so that she wouldn't resist him!'

'Hark at her poxy defender! Don't you fling yourself around, you'll bust your buttons.'

'Happen she'll put up your wages when she finds out you're speaking up for her.'

'Or give you a pair of Maciej's old breeches!'

They fell about laughing and mocking him.

'Her husband can't stand up for her and nor will anyone else, so I'll defend her ... I will, dammit, and if I hear one more bad word, I'll not hold back my fists ... Loudmouth scum! If it were one of your wives or sisters, you'd be smashing faces!'

'Shut your mouth, stable boy! It's not your business – stick to horses' tails!' Stacho Płoszka thundered at him.

'And watch you don't catch it first,' added Wachnik.

'And keep your nose out o' farmers' business, mat-head!' ⁴ another threw back at him, as they left.

'Poxy farmers, squire scum! I might be in service, but I don't nick quarts from anyone's storeroom to take to the Jew! You don't know me yet!' he shouted at them as they hurriedly departed, looking suddenly awkward. Not responding now to his yells, they dispersed about the cottages.

Evening had settled already, though it was quite windy and oddly bright. The sun had long since set, but broad blood-red gulfs still stretched across the sky like ruptured anthills, and great clouds were slowly gathering. A strange unease hung in the air. The wind boomed high from time to time, snatching at the tips of the tallest trees, and the cries of unseen birds could be heard as they crossed the sky. The geese were honking in the farmsteads, who knows why, and the dogs barked like mad, running right out on to the fields. It was the same inside the cottages, for after supper nobody stayed inside or sat on the threshold as usual: they all went to their neighbours and gathered at the fences, talking quietly.

The village seemed deserted. There was none of the laughter or singing usually to be heard on a warm evening, for everyone was debating in whispers, watchful of the children and girls, and all were seized by the same indignation and horror.

At Hanka's, too, a few friends had gathered on the porch: they had rushed to take pity on her and learn something more of Jagna. They tried broaching the matter from a number of directions, but Hanka did no more than reply sadly:

'It's shameful and an offence to God, but also quite the misfortune.'

'For sure, and tomorrow the whole parish will know of it.'

'And soon start saying that the worst things happen in Lipce.'

'And the disgrace will be on all the Lipce women.'

'Because they're that holy, all of 'em, that if someone were to force 'em, they'd do the same!' mocked Jagustynka.

'Quiet, it's no time for jokes!' Hanka rebuked her, and said not another word.

Even though the shame of it still choked her, the anger at Jagna that had held her in its grip had now vanished. As soon as her friends had gone their way, she looked in on the other side, ostensibly to see Maciej, but noticing Jagusia asleep in her clothes, Hanka closed the door behind and, feeling her way, undressed her carefully.

'May God keep us from such a fate!' she thought later with strange pity, and looked in on her a few more times that evening.

Jagustynka must have noticed something, for she remarked almost reluctantly:

'Jagna's not without sin, but the Voyt is most guilty.'

'True, and they should pay him back for everything, him!' Hanka confirmed with such ferocity that Pietrek looked at her gratefully.

And they'd hit the mark, for late into the night old Płoszka and the Koziołs were running about the village, stirring people against him. Płoszka even went inside the cottages, where he would say, as though in jest:

'Oh, what a Voyt we've landed! There's not a greater blade in the whole *powiat*!'

Since no one seemed to concur, he trailed off to the inn. Some of the smaller farmers were there already. He stood them vodka once and then again, and when they'd loosened up a bit, he began to say his piece:

'Quite a Voyt we've got! Eh?'

'It's not the first time!' Kobus threw in cautiously.

'I maintain I know a thing or two about him and I'm saying nothing!' muttered Sikora, slightly tipsy and leaning heavily on the bar.

'You can keep whatever you maintain to yourself: no one's forcing it out of you!' Płoszka retorted and began quietly to incite feeling against the Voyt, declaring what a bad example he was to the people, what disgrace had come about through him and all manner of other things.

'I maintain I know a thing or two about you as well, though I'm saying nothing,' Sikora muttered again.

'Throw 'im out of office, it's the only solution. He'll soon stop blowing his trumpet!' Płoszka declared, standing them another quart. 'We put him in the Voyt's chair, we can unseat him! What he did today brings shame on the whole village, but he's done worse. He's always held with the squire against the community, he wants a school in Lipce. ⁵ it was him that recommended the Germans in Podlesie to the squire. And he's forever carousing, drinking, put a barn up for himself, bought more horses, eats meat every week and drinks tea – on whose money? Eh? Not his own, nay, but the community's ...'

'I maintain Voyt's a swine, but you'd like to stick your snout in the trough an' all!' Sikora's mutter interrupted him.

'He's drunk and blathering.'

'I maintain I won't be choosing you for Voyt!'

They moved away from him and conferred together long into the night.

The next day, the whole story spread further still, for unlike every other year, the priest had forbidden an altar to be erected at the Voyt's. Indeed, he'd heard about everything and first thing that morning demanded that they summon Dominikowa, who had not returned until midnight the day before, and was so angry that he scolded the organist and smacked Ambrozy with the stem of his pipe.

Corpus Christi came and, as in previous years, the weather was grand, but also strangely quiet and stifling. Not the slightest breeze stirred and the sun quickly began to beat down mercilessly from the east. In the parched dry air, the leaves drooped and wilted and the wheat bowed limply, the sand burning folk's feet like hot coals, while resin ran from the planks in the walls, melted by the heat.

The Lord Jesus was indulging himself and roasting them ever harder, but folk seemed not to notice, for from dawn itself there'd been uproar in the village and commotion. They were getting ready for church. The girls, who were to carry the shrines and sprinkle flowers before the priest during the procession, ran about like scalded cats from house to house to try on their clothes, brush their hair and talk nonsense together, whereas the older folk dressed the altars in all haste. There was one at the miller's, at the presbytery instead of at the Voyt's, and at Boryna's, where Hanka and the others had been helping Rocho since dawn.

They were almost first to finish, and had dressed the altar so beautifully that people were amazed and said it was more beautiful even than the miller's.

And indeed it was: it stood like a little chapel in front of the porch, woven from birch branches and greenery. They'd covered it completely in woollen cloth, in colours that dazzled the eyes, while the altar stood raised in the middle, dressed in the whitest of fine sheets and set with candles and flowers in milk churns that Józka had plastered with shapes cut from golden paper. A huge picture of the Mother of God hung above the altar, and beside it they'd hung smaller ones – as many as would fit. And to adorn the altar even further, directly above it they fastened a cage with a blackbird that Nastusia had brought: the bird was squawking away, for Witek was quietly whistling to it.

All the fences along the road were stuck with branches of spruce and birch by turn, sprinkled thickly with yellow sand and strewn with sweet flag.

Józka had heaved cornflowers, larkspur and field vetch by the armful to dress the walls of the chapel. She fixed them to the pictures too, the candleholders and wherever else she could, so that even the ground in front of the altar was strewn with flowers. Nor did she stint on the cottage, where whole walls and windows now disappeared under the greenery, and she stuck sweet flag into the thatch.

Everyone put their hands equally to the work, all except for Jagusia, who had slipped out of the house early in the morning, and did not appear again.

Though they were among the first to finish, it was not before the sun was rising over the village and more and more carts rattled by, arriving from other villages.

So they quickly began to prepare for church.

Only Witek stayed behind to guard the fences, for a crowd of children were jostling to look at the altar and to whistle to the blackbird. He tried chasing them away with a branch, but to no avail, and so he set his stork on them, who, well trained as he was, strutted towards them, aiming his sharp beak threateningly at their bare legs, making them scatter with a shout.

The Angelus bell had just sounded when the whole household came out. Józka ran ahead, all in white, her boots tied with red laces and a prayer book in her hand.

'Witek, how do I look? Eh?' she asked, twirling in front of him on her heel.

'Grand, like a white goose!' he said with admiration.

'You know as much about it as your stork. Hanka says there'll not be another girl in the village dressed like this,' she prattled, pulling at her too-short clothes.

'My! ... And your knees show red through your skirt like the legs of a goose under its feathers.'

'Daft boy! Go look at Łapa's tail! Ha, best hide the stork: priest'll be by with the procession and see and recognize him,' she warned him more quietly.

'True, she's proper fine and fancy, and the mistress is all puffed out like a turkey!' he whispered, watching them go down the road. But, remembering her warning, he took the stork down to the potato pit, and ordered Łapa to stand guard by the altar to protect it from the children. He himself ran off to Maciej, lying in the orchard as he did every day.

The village was completely quiet now. All the carts had arrived and the people had passed by, so the roads had emptied. Children were left playing here and there in the yards. The dogs lazed in the sun and swallows swooped over the pond in the warm air. In the church, right after the Angelus bell, the service began. The priest came out to the altar and the organ struck up, but straight after the sermon all the bells rang, and the singing burst forth, making the doves take off from the church roofs. The folk began to pour past the great doors, and out came the lowered banners, burning lamps and the holy pictures carried by girls dressed in white, and finally the red baldachin under which the priest, a golden monstrance in his hand, slowly descended the steps.

And once they'd all got themselves in place for the procession, making a long pathway down the middle of the crowd, lined with burning candles, the priest again sang out:

'I stand at your gates, O Lord! ...'

And all the people thundered in one great, soaring voice:

'I await your Mercy ...'

And they set off, singing as they squeezed past the gates of the graveyard, and jostling, since it was an enormous rally. The whole parish was there, and even all the manors, with the squires leading the priest and more of them escorting him at his side with candles. The baldachin was carried by farmers, though, as if to spite the Lipce folk, they were all strangers from other villages.

The whole procession spilled out of the graveyard and on to the square, which was almost white in the sweltering heat. The sun blazed straight into their eyes, scorching them like living fire, so that they moved slowly amid the ringing of bells, the singing, the fragrant smoke of the thurible, the clouds of dust and the candles, and all the blossom scattered under the feet of the priest.

They made their way to the first altar on the right, at Boryna's: the road was packed in a flash, the fences creaking, several folk slipping down the steep side of the pond and the roadside trees shaking from the pressure of bodies. They pounded along in a dense, singing throng, like a river of many colours, while in the middle, like a boat riding a wave, floated the red baldachin and the banners, pictures and holy figures all in tulie and flowers.

They were pressed head to head, barely breathing in the heat and crush, but singing with all their hearts, all their might, full throated, so that it seemed as though the whole world sang with them to the glory of the Lord. As though those lofty lindens, those black alders, those waters heated in the sun, those slender birches, those low meadows and green fields, those distances unfathomed by the eye, the cottages, and everything that ever was, added its heartfelt voice, brimming with joy, and a great song pealed like swirling thunder on the hot air and soared through the pale sky towards the sun.

The leaves on the trees quivered at the singing voices and the last blossoms floated to the ground.

In front of Boryna's, the priest read the first Gospel and, after a short rest, led the folk to the miller's altar.

The heat wave grew more intense and became almost unbearable. Throats were clogged with dust, the sun was white hot and long pale streaks were drawn across the bright sky. The baking air trembled and shimmered before the eyes like boiling water – it was gathering for a storm.

The procession had gone on for a good hour and although people were subsiding in the blistering heat, and though the priest himself was covered with sweat and red as a beetroot, they carried on slowly to each altar individually, listening to the Gospel at each one and singing new hymns.

Sometimes, when folk fell silent for a moment and only the shuffling of feet could be heard, the song of a skylark would rise from the fields in that sudden silence, a cuckoo would call persistently and the swallows twitter above the thatched roofs. The church bells pealed ceaselessly; slowly they rang, with powerful, fervent, drawn-out voices.

And though folk sang again, and though the men did not spare their voices, the women trilled shrill and high, the children squealed, the little bells jangled and heavy footsteps pounded on the dry ground – still the voices of the bells rose above everything. They sang pure and high, soaring deep and golden, full of joy and jubilation, vigorous and loud as someone hammering at the sun, and the whole world seemed to sway and ring out.

And when they'd finished at the altars, the service continued a long time yet in church, the organ boomed and the singing resounded.

Barely had they streamed out of the church to cool down a bit under the trees, dig out a groz for the beggars and get together with their friends, when it suddenly darkened, distant thunder rumbled and a dry, searing wind began to spin, snatching at the trees and lifting the dust from the roads.

People from the neighbouring villages began to leave hurriedly.

At first, there were only a few drops of fine rain, hot and scanty, making it even more humid and stifling, while the sun still beat down mercilessly and the croaking of the frogs became quieter and more sleepy. Then it grew a little gloomier, dimmer in the distance, thunder rumbled again and in the blue-tinted east, short pale streaks of lightning began to flicker.

The storm was coming from the eastern side. Dark blue sheets of cloud, drunk with rain or hail, swept the sky like sickles. A brief but booming burst of wind sprang up ahead, whistling through the tips of the trees and tugging at the wheat. Birds fled squawking under the roofs. Even the dogs raced to the cottages, the cattle escaped from the fields and pillars of dust were spinning along the roads, while claps of thunder echoed ever nearer.

In less than a couple of prayers, the sun began to sink into a ruddy, nasty haze through which it shone as though behind a smoke-stained windowpane. The thunder was already booming above the village and such a gale began to blast, it was a wonder the trees were not torn up by the roots. Tree branches and sheaves of straw from the roofs were flung far afield. Somewhere in the woods the first thunderbolts crashed and the whole sky turned a liverish blue. The sun went out, the wind howled and thunderbolts fell one after another, again and again, making the ground shake. Streaks of lightning tore open the cloudy sky, their blazing brightness searing the eyes.

The booming made the houses shudder and all living creatures crouched low in fright.

Fortunately, the storm rumbled past along the edges of the village. The thunderbolts struck somewhere far away, the gale passed through without causing damage and the sky began to clear – until vespers, when a torrential rain began to lash. Such a downpour commenced that in a flash it had flattened the wheat, the river had swollen and water came foaming and tumbling from all the ditches, baulks and furrows.

It did not quieten until evening, when the rain passed and in the west the sun emerged in a great radiant red orb from behind the clouds ...

Lipce revived again. People began to open doors, come outside and breathe the cool air with pleasure. Everything smelled fragrant after the rain, the young birches and the garden mint most of all. The earth had softened as though kindled in sunshine. Puddles along the roads blazed, leaves and grass shone and the foaming water flamed, flowing with a joyful gurgle into the pond.

The faintest of winds combed the bent wheat and a powerful bracing freshness pulsed from the woods and fields and seeped into the soul. Children were shouting and splashing in the brooks and ditches, the birds twittered in the thickets, the dogs were baying, the guinea fowl squawked from the farmyards, and all the homesteads, roads, cottages and yards rang with shouts and chatter. Somewhere near the mill a song could already be heard:

*'The rain has drenched me, drenched me through,
Take me in for the night, Maryś, inside with you.'*

While from the field the shrill full-throated singing of the shepherdesses rose above the bellowing of the flocks:

*'When you'd scythed the rye, you said
When you'd shorn the lamb, we'd wed.
Now you've reaped both lamb and rye,
But you've left me high and dry.
O dana, da dana!'*

Carts began to leave with the folk who'd waited out the storm, but many farmers from neighbouring villages remained as guests with the Lipce villagers: they were those who had so kindly come to help the women. The wealthier entertained them at their homes, stinting neither food nor drink, while the poorer took their benefactors to the inn, for it was always more cheerful and merrier to celebrate together.

The boys fetched musicians, and right after vespers the wailing of fiddles, the plonking of bass viols and the jangling burr of the tabour could be heard from the inn.

Others, too, came thick and fast just for the fun, for it was an age, not since Shrovetide indeed, that they'd gathered for music and dancing.

Such numbers came there was no room inside, and a fair few had to make do with perching on the logs outside the inn, but as the weather was lovely and the sky spilling with gold, a crowd ranged themselves against the wall, shouting to the Jew to bring them drinks.

Since it was almost all young ones crowding the inn, the *oberek* began right away, making the walls and beams groan. To considerable amazement, the dancing was led by Dominikowa's Szymek with Nastusia. In vain did his younger brother try to discourage him, quietly tugging at his sleeve. To no avail, for the lad was exuberant and did not wish to listen. He knocked back vodka and forced it on Nastka and his cronies. When the music struck up, he threw coins to the players, seized Nastka round the waist and yelled at the top of his voice:

'Look sharp, boys, get cracking – do it our way!'

And he thrashed about the room like a frisky colt, with fierce shouts and spiritedly stamping his heels.

'He'll shake the straw loose in his boots!' muttered Ambrozy, swallowing greedily as he watched those drinking alongside. 'And his pins'll fall apart the way he's thwacking 'em like flails!' he added louder, moving closer.

'Mind you don't lose your own,' muttered Mateusz, standing with his cronies.

'I'll take a vodka with you as a peace offering,' Ambrozy declared, laughing.

'Here, and mind you don't swallow the glass as well, you old drunk!' He handed him a full glass and turned his back on him, for Grzela, the Voyt's brother, had begun telling them something quietly. Those leaning on the bar listened carefully, paying no attention to the dancing nor to the vodka standing before them. Six of them there were, all lads from the first families, born and bred in the village, sons of farmers. They were deep in discussion, but when the noise grew louder and the room more crowded, they moved to the Jew's lodgings, as the snug was taken up by farmers and their guests.

The room was cramped, stuffed with a jumble of beds in which so many little Jewish kids were sleeping they could barely fit around the table. A single tallow candle smoked in a brass candleholder hanging from the ceiling. Grzela passed the bottle around. They had a drink and another, yet no one raised the matter that had brought them there until Mateusz gibed:

'Come on, Grzela, we're sitting here like crows waiting for rain!'

Before Grzela could begin, the blacksmith came in and greeted them, looking about for a place to sit and join them.

'That tarfaced bugger, always springing up where he's not been sown!' Mateusz erupted. 'Here's to you Michał!' he added quickly, suppressing his annoyance.

The blacksmith had a drink and, pulling a face, declared jokingly:

'I'm not greedy for others' secrets, and I see I'm not wanted here ...'

'You said it! Since you have the pleasure of meeting the Germans on a Friday for coffee and bacon, then they'll surely suit you still better today, on such a holiday ...'

'You, Płoszka, sound like you've had one too many ...' he retorted.

'I'm only saying what everyone knows, that you're haggling with 'em every day.'

'I'll take work from any who offer it. I don't pick and choose.'

'Work! It's something more than work you're fixing,' Wachnik said more quietly.

'Like you fixed our wood with the squire,' Pryczek added menacingly.

'Seems I've happened on a courtroom ... well, well! How they do know everything.'

'Leave him be. He does his business without us, we'll do ours without him,' said Grzela, looking fiercely straight into his shifty eyes.

'If the gendarme saw you through the window, he might think you were conspiring against someone!' the blacksmith pretended to mock, but his lips were trembling with anger.

'Maybe, but not against you: you're small fry, Michał.'

The blacksmith pulled down his cap and went out, slamming the door.

'He got a sniff o' something and come running to scout.'

'He's ready to go listen under the window now.'

'He'll hear something about himself that'll soon put him off.'

'Quiet, boys!' Grzela began solemnly. 'I've told you already that Podlesie's not yet sold to the Germans, but the deed could be signed any day, and they even said it could be next Thursday.'

'As we know full well, and something must be done!' Mateusz cried impatiently.

'What's your counsel, Grzela: you know books, you read the paper, comes easier for you.'

'If the Germans buy up and settle beside us, it'll be like in Gorki: there won't be air enough to breathe in Lipce and we'll be off to Hamerica with our bags.'

'And our fathers do nothing but scratch their heads, sigh and cannot fathom what to do.'

'And won't give up the farms to us!'

So they each added, one after another.

'Germans – what of 'em! Tried the same game in Liszki and our peasants bought 'em out, every one. If it were different in Gorki, that were the peasants' fault: forever drinking, taking 'em to court, and ended up out on their ears and begging.'

'Well we can buy 'em out of Podlesie and see 'em off!' cried Jędrek Boryna, Antek's cousin.

'Easy to say: there's nothing to buy with right now, though they're selling at only sixty roubles a morgen, but after, when you find it's a thousand for the same?'

'If our fathers would hand over the proper portions, we'd sort it quicker.'

'For sure, aye! I'd know just what to do!' they yelled.

'Oh, you foolish lot! The old 'uns can barely feed 'emselves on their land entire, and you want to make money on portions of it!' Grzela interrupted.

They fell silent all of a sudden, for the truth he spoke was like an axe coming down on their heads.

'The trouble is not that your fathers won't hand over the farms,' he went on, 'but that in Lipce there's too little land, there are more folk all the time, and what was enough for three in our grandfathers' time must now be divided between ten.'

'God's truth! Aye, that's the truth of it! Aye!' they murmured, worried.

'Buy Podlesie and divide it up!' someone burst out.

'The village'd buy it, but where's the money!' muttered Mateusz.

'Wait on, maybe something will turn up.'

Mateusz suddenly leapt up, banged the table with his fist and shouted:

'Wait and see, then, do as you like, but I've had it and when I get mad enough, I'll chuck the village and go to town – people live better there.'

'Please yourself, but others must stay and manage somehow.'

'Well, I can't stand it no more, devil take it. It's that crowded, it's a wonder the houses don't fall apart, so many squeezed inside, so poor the pips squeak, and just nearby there's free land asking to be taken ... and you cannot take a bite, though you're dying of hunger, there's nothing to buy it with and no one to borrow from. To hell with such a system.'

Grzela told how it was different in other countries.

They listened, sighing regretfully, but Mateusz interrupted him:

'What's it to us that others have it better! Show a starving man a full bowl and hide it, let him get a skinful with just a look! They have it better: there's some kind of protection for folk, not like here, with us, where every peasant grows like a wild tree in an empty field. Who cares if he perishes or thrives so long as he pays his taxes, serves in the army and does as he's told! This life makes me sick ...'

Grzela heard him out patiently, and then began again:

'There's only one way for Podlesie to be ours.'

They shifted closer still, so as not to miss a word, when suddenly such a din shook the whole inn, that the windows buzzed and the music stopped playing. Someone ran out to investigate and came back to recount with a laugh what had happened: it was Dominikowa making merry hell. She'd come flying in with a stick to fetch her sons, meaning to beat them and take them home by force, only they'd resisted and driven their mother out of the inn. Now Szymek was getting blind drunk and Jędrzych, tipsy as a newt, was howling in the fireplace.

They turned their attention once again to Grzela, who was beginning to set out his plan: to make peace with the squire and, in exchange for a morgen of the wood, to ask for four morgen of fields in Podlesie!

They were greatly taken aback and overjoyed at such a possibility. Grzela said too that a village near Plock had done the very same, he'd read about it in the paper.

'To us, boys! Jew, more vodka!' shouted Ploszka through the door.

'We'd have twelve fields for three morgen of wood!'

'And ten for us, a whole farm!'

'And he could add a few bushes for fuel.'

'And for pasture he could give a morgen of meadow.'

'And some timber for building houses!'

So they each called, one after another.

'In a minute, you'll be wanting him to give you a horse and cart each, and a cow, eh?' Mateusz mocked.

'Quiet now! ... We've got to persuade the farmers to meet, then go to the squire and put it to him: maybe he'll agree.'

Mateusz interrupted him:

'He'll not agree without a knife to his throat. He needs money right away and the Germans can give it him soon as tomorrow, he only has to agree ... And by the time our lot have scratched their heads, had a conference, by the time they're of one mind, by the time the women have worked on 'em, months'll go by, the squire'll sell and turn his back on us – and then he can afford to wait for when the case with the wood comes up. Grzela's plan is clever, but seems to me it should be stood the other way up.'

'Go on then, Mateusz, what's your counsel!'

'No talking, no conferring – do the same as with the wood.'

'Sometimes you can and sometimes you can't!' muttered Grzela.

'And I'm telling you, you can, only a bit different, with the same outcome ... Go to the Germans all together and tell 'em, peaceful like, not to dare buy Podlesie ...'

'And they're so stupid they'll be scared straight off and listen!'

'So we'll give 'em notice that if they don't listen and they do buy, we won't let 'em sow, we won't let 'em build, we won't move a step from the fields. Watch and see if they're not scared! We'll smoke 'em out like foxes from a lair.'

'Oh aye, like they won't sort it! ... As God's in heaven, they'll have us back in the slammer for threats like that!' Grzela erupted.

'If they lock us up, they'll let us out again, we won't be there for ever, but when they do, it'll be even worse for the Germans ... They're not stupid and they'll consider carefully first if war with us will be of benefit to them ... The squire'll sing a different tune when we chase off his buyers, but if not ...'

But Grzela could stand it no longer. Leaping up from the table, he began to dissuade them as best he could from such rash plans. He pointed out what lawsuits could arise, new losses for everyone, more ruin, and that these constant revolts would cost them several years in the slammer ... that it could all be done peaceably with the squire himself ... He adjured and beseeched them not to bring new misfortune upon the people. He went on for a couple of prayers at least, turning crimson, and even kissed each one individually, begging and pleading that they should desist, but all in vain, like throwing peas at the wall. Finally, Mateusz declared:

'You preach like you're in church, like you're reading from a book, but we need something different!'

Then everyone began to speak at once, leaping up, beating their fists on the table and yelling, exhilarated:

'Here's to us – see off the Germans, give the Krauts the boot! Mateusz says right, we're listening to him, and whoever's scared can hide under his quilt!'

There was no way to get through to them, so carried away were they.

Jankiel came in with a bottle at that moment. He listened and, wiping the spilled vodka from the table, said hesitantly:

'Mateusz has a keppele;⁶ he gives good counsel.'

'What! Jankiel against the Germans too! Well now!' they cried, amazed.

'Because I prefer to hold with my own. I know the same misery as the rest, but with God's help we get by somehow ... But wherever the German comes, then not only does a poor old Jew have nothing to live on, but nor does a dog have anything to eat ... May they perish, let the pestilence take them!'

'A Jew, and on the side of the people! Hear that, eh?'

They were greatly surprised.

'I'm a Jew but I was not found in the forest. I was born here, like you, my grandfather and father too ... so whose side am I to take? ... Eh? ... Am I not one of you? ... Why, if things are better for you, then they are better for me! ... If you are going to be farmers, then I will trade with you! ... As my grandfather with yours, is it not so? ... And this clever plan of yours to fix the German, I'll stand you a whole bottle of arak! ... Your health, farmers of Podlesie!' he called, drinking to Grzela.

They drank away and with such a rush of joy it was a wonder they didn't kiss the Jew upon the beard. Sitting him between them, they went over it all once more, seeking his counsel in everything. Even Grzela cheered up and joined in again, so that they should not suspect him of anything ill.

But their discussion did not last much longer, for Mateusz got up and cried:

'To the inn, boys, let's stretch our legs, enough for today!'

In they trooped, and Mateusz immediately whisked Tereska away from someone and threw himself into the dance. Behind him the others pulled lasses out of corners, shouting to the musicians and launching upon the dance like a whirlwind.

Indeed, the music soon struck up furiously, for the players knew that with Mateusz it was no trivial matter; he paid, but was ready to use his fists.

Everyone was dancing for all they were worth. They were drunk as lords: shouts, music, stamping and spirited cries filled the chamber like a turbulent stream, pouring out through the open doors and windows. Outside there was a fine party going on under the walls, with glasses chinking, farmers toasting each other repeatedly, conferring ever more loudly, their voices slurring thickly.

Night had come. The stars shone bright, the low trees murmured quietly and from the marshlands came the croaking of frogs and, now and again, the drone of bumblebees. Nightingales lamented in the orchards and it was warm and fragrant. Folk were glad of the fresh cool air. Now and again some couple, arms about each other's waists, would slip out of the inn and go off into the shadows ... While by the wall it grew louder all the time, everyone talking at once, so that it was hard to make head or tail of it.

'... I'd only just let out the hog, he'd not even managed to stick his snout in the potatoes and here she comes with her mouth.'

'Throw her out the village! ... Throw her out!'

'I mark they did the same with one in my young days! ... Flogged to bleeding outside the church, drove her with the cows beyond the boundary mounds and there was peace ...'

'Jew, a quart of the strong stuff!'

'She took the milk from my grey, she did!'

'Choose a new one, everyone says so ...'

'Tear out evil, before it puts down stronger roots ...'

'Clear the grain, before weeds stifle it ...'

'Drink to me, then, and I'll tell you something ...'

'Take a bull by the horns, and hold tight till it goes down ...'

'Two morgen and another – three morgen; three morgen and another – four morgen.'

'Drink, brother, your own kin wouldn't treat you better ...'

Tatters of conversations broke from the gloom. There was no telling who was speaking and to whom. Only Ambroz's thick voice clearly dominated the rest, first here, then there, for he went constantly from group to group, or looked into the inn, and garnering a goblet everywhere he was now completely drunk. Staggering mightily, he collared someone at the bar and began to badger them dolefully:

'I christened yer, Woytek, and rang the bells that hard for yer wife, me legs swelled up. Stand me a glass, brother! And if it's a full pint, I'll ring it for her eternal rest and fix you up with another wench, a young 'un, firm as a turnip! Stand me one, brother, a pint now ...'

The young people caroused unflaggingly, so that the whole room was filled with noise, swirling skirts and capotes. They sang to the music and danced more and more wildly. Even the older women shook a leg, squealing, while Jagustynka, having pushed her way to the middle, put her hands on her hips and, stamping her feet, sang hoarsely:

'I don't fear the wolf, not even by the burrowful!

I don't fear a lord, not even by the horde!'

CHAPTER 10

Lo and behold, those days from Corpus Christi to Sunday did not pass easily for Mateusz, Grzela or their fellows. Mateusz interrupted his work on Stacho's cottage and others too abandoned their tasks. They spent whole days and evenings in going about the cottages singly, inciting the villagers against the Germans, urging folk to drive them out of Podlesie.

The innkeeper, for his part, did not refrain from persuasion, offering drink and credit, if need be, for the more stubborn among them, but still it was an uphill battle. The older folk just scratched their heads and sighed deeply. Not leaning in any particular direction, they looked to each other and to the women, who were as one in opposing any foray against the Germans.

'Ha! What's got into their heads now! Wasn't there ruination enough with the wood? They've barely finished doing time for that and now they want to bring new troubles upon the village!' they cried. The Solty's wife, usually quiet, took a broom to Grzela.

'If you start inciting people to a new revolt, I'll tell on you to the gendarmes! You loafing scum, cannot be bothered to work – taking walks is all you lot are good for!' she screamed away in front of the cottage. Balcerkowa, meanwhile, roared at Mateusz:

'I'll set the dogs on you idlers! I'll have boiling water at the ready!'

All of them were dead set against persuasion, deaf to any explanation or pleading, so that it was impossible to reason with them; they shouted all the men down and many a woman burst into sobs and lamentation.

'I'll not let my man go! I'll hang on to his capote and you can cut my legs off, I'll not let go! ... Haven't we suffered misery enough!'

'May balls of fire strike you numbskulls!' Mateusz cursed. 'Croaking and croaking like magpies heralding rain. Why a calf'd understand human talk easier than a woman a clever word!' he declared, deeply discouraged.

'Give over, Grzela, you'll not get through to 'em: you'd have to take a stick to every one of 'em, unless it were your wife, then she might listen,' he complained sadly.

'That's how they are, you can't remake 'em by force. You need a different way with 'em, so don't oppose: nod, and slowly draw 'em to your side.'

So said Grzela, not relinquishing the matter, for though he'd been opposed to it himself at first, once he'd weighed up that no other way was possible, he gave himself over to it completely. He was a tough fellow, and intransigent. Whatever he set himself, he had to achieve, no matter what stood in the way, so now, too, he paid no heed to anything. If they closed doors in his face, he talked through the window; if the women blustered, he did not get cross, but even sympathized and, if need be, flattered, asking about their children and praising their households, until in the end he'd said his piece; and if he had no luck, he just went on. Two whole days he was everywhere in the village – in the cottages, in the gardens, even out in the fields he went, accosting folk on this matter and that, telling them his view. For those who did not grasp it immediately, he drew the Podlesie fields on the ground, showing the plots and patiently explaining the benefits to each one. Yet all his efforts would have been in vain were it not for Rocho's help. On Saturday afternoon, realizing that they would not move the village, they summoned Rocho behind Boryna's barn and confided in him. They were afraid he would oppose them. But Rocho thought briefly and said:

'It's a rogue's way, but there's no time for any other, so I'll help you willingly.'

And off he went through the gardens to the priest as he sat watching the farmhand who was scything the clover. He recounted afterwards how the priest had immediately grown angry at Rocho, shouting and stopping his ears, not even wanting to listen, but how both then had sat on the baulk and conferred a long time. It seemed Rocho had persuaded him, for at dusk, when people began to come down from the fields, the priest came into the village, ostensibly to take the cool air, but instead looking in on the farmsteads and asking all manner of questions. He chatted mainly with the women and eventually with each one separately, saying quietly:

'The boys mean well. You must hurry while there's time. You do your part and I will go to the squire and try to persuade him.'

And he so convinced the women that they objected no longer, while the farmers began to argue that since it was the priest encouraging them, the thing was worth doing.

They discussed it all evening, but by early on Sunday they were as one.

They were to go after vespers, with Rocho at their head, since he could speak with the Germans in their own tongue. This is what Rocho had promised the boys he would do. They went off hooting with joy.

Sitting on Boryna's porch, he was fingering the beads of his rosary and pondering something. It was still early. They'd only just tidied away the bowls after breakfast, so that the smell of rye soup and crackling still tickled the nostrils and Pietrek was stretching after the meal.

It was growing warmer though not yet hot and the swallows were cutting through the air like bullets. The sun was just rising behind the cottages and the thick dry grass was still gleaming in the shade. A chill drifted from the fields, bearing the scent of wheat.

The house was quiet, as usual on a Sunday, and the women were busy with their chores. The children sat around their bowls on the porch eating slowly and defending themselves, squealing, with their spoons, as Łapa tried to push his way among them. The sow groaned by the wall in the sun as the piglets butted her with their heads to get to the milk. The stork chased the hens and clattered and strutted after the coit frolicking in the yard. The trees murmured from time to time and the orchard swayed, while in the fields the only sounds were the hum of bees going about their work and the warbling of larks.

A Sunday hush descended upon the village, with only the occasional voice to be heard, a hen summoning her chicks, or somewhere by the pond the laughter of boys scrubbing themselves or the quacking of ducks.

The roads lay empty and shimmering in the sun, and barely anyone passed by. Sometimes a girl could be seen combing her hair on a threshold or someone playing quietly on a pipe.

Rocho told his beads. Sometimes he listened, but mainly he thought about Jagusia, hearing her mill about the room. Sometimes she stood behind him, sometimes she'd go out into the yard and, returning, she'd drop her eyes, her drawn face flushing crimson so that he felt sorry for her.

'Jaguś!' he whispered kindly, raising his eyes to her.

She stopped, holding her breath, waiting for him to speak, but he, as though not knowing what to say, just muttered something and fell silent.

Going over to her own side again, she sat down at the open window and, leaning against the frame, looked out with forlorn eyes at the sunlit world, at the white clouds wandering across the bright sky like a gaggle of geese. Heavy sighs rent her breast and tears would drip at times from her reddened eyes and flow freely down her gaunt, wan face. Aye, hadn't she been through enough these last days? Why, the whole village was baiting her, like a mangy dog; the women turned their backs on her when she passed, and yesterday even the youngest Gulbas had tossed mud at her and shouted:

'Voyt's floozy!'

Oh! It was like knives piercing her and the shame all but choked her!

My God, how was she guilty? ... He'd got her drunk, after all, so that she'd lost all sense of God's world ... Could she get away? ... And now they were all at her, the whole village was shunning her as if she had the plague, and no one stood in her defence.

Where could she go now? They'd close the doors in her face, and were ready to set the dogs on her! ... She couldn't even go to her mother's: the old woman all but chased her out, despite her pleas and weeping ... If it weren't for Hanka, she'd have done herself an injury ... Aye, Antek's wife alone had shown her kindness, not withdrawing a helping hand and even defending her before people ...

For she wasn't the guilty one, no – it was the Voyt. He'd tempted and forced her into sin, and most guilty of all was that rotten old thing! She thought suddenly of her husband.

'He's shackled my whole life! I would have been an unwed girl, and they wouldn't have let me be wronged, no ... And what have I gained by him? Neither life, nor freedom!'

As she brooded feverishly, the heartache in her seemed to vanish and instead there grew a fierce anger which so roused her that she began to dart about the room.

'Surely, everything bad has been because of him ... All that business with Antek wouldn't have happened ... and the Voyt would never have dared ... and ...' she protested. She would have lived peacefully like before, like everyone else ... The Evil One had placed him in her path and tempted her mother with morgen, and now she had to suffer ... she did ... 'I wish the worms'd devour you!' she blurted, clenching her fists vengefully. Glimpsing the cart with the sick man under the trees through the gable window, she ran there suddenly and leaning over him, full of hate, she hissed:

'I wish you'd die quick as can be, you old dog!'

The old man stared at her and mumbled something, but she'd flown off: the relief of it – she had someone on whom to vent her grievances.

The blacksmith was standing on the porch when she came back but he pretended not to notice her. Instead he addressed Rocho loudly:

'Mateusz is saying that they're going to see the Germans with you at their head ...'

'They asked, so I'll go to our neighbours with them,' Rocho confirmed resolutely.

'They're preparing new stocks for themselves. The villagers have become emboldened against the squire and think if they go off in a band again with sticks and shouts, then the Germans will take fright and won't buy Podlesie.' He could barely restrain his anger.

'Maybe they won't, who knows?'

'Oh, indeed! They've measured out all the plots, all the families have been brought over already, they're digging wells, carting in stone for foundations ...'

'I know for a fact they haven't signed the deeds at the notary's yet.'

'They swore to me it was all done.'

'I'm saying what I know, and if the squire found better buyers ...'

'Well, Lipce's not buying. No one stinks of ready cash ...'

'Grzela's doing the sums and it seems to me ...'

'Grzela!' he interrupted abruptly. 'Grzela's pushing himself forward, bamboozling folk and leading them astray ...'

'We'll see how it turns out, we'll see!' said Rocho, smiling a little, while the blacksmith almost tore his moustache out in rage.

'Jacek from the chancellery!' he called out, spotting a mandarin collar at the fence.

'For "Anna Maćwiejówna Boryna" – letter from the chancellery!' recited Jacek, pulling out an envelope from his bag.

Hanka came running and anxiously turned the letter over, not knowing what to do with it.

'I'll read it,' said Rocho.

The blacksmith made to read over his shoulder, but Rocho quickly folded the letter and said evenly:

'The court is informing you, Hanka, that you can see Antek once a week.'

Hanka paid the messenger and went inside. Once the blacksmith had departed, Rocho went after her, calling joyfully:

'There's something else in the letter. I didn't want to say in front of the blacksmith! The court informs you that you're to bring the five hundred roubles pledge or bond, and they'll let Antek go straight away ... What is it?'

Hanka did not reply. Her voice had vanished clean away. She stood as though frozen, her face all flushed, then she went pale as the wall. Her eyes clouded with tears, she spread her hands and with a heavy sigh she fell full length in front of the holy pictures.

Rocho crept out quietly and sat on the porch. Reading the letter again, he smiled to himself, equally delighted, and in a little while looked into the chamber once more.

Hanka was kneeling in the middle of the floor, praying with all her soul. It was a wonder her heart did not split with joy from the ardour of her thanksgiving. Brief broken sighs and fervent whispers seemed to flicker throughout the room, like pillars of heartfelt fire, flowing with living blood, at the feet of the Lady of Częstochowa. She was almost dying of happiness. Her tears streamed, washing away the memory of all that old pain and injury. She got up eventually and, wiping her tears, said to Rocho:

'I'm ready now for whatever happens, for even if it's as bad as can be, it couldn't ever be worse.'

He was amazed at how suddenly she had changed: her eyes sparkled, the blood coloured her pale cheeks and she drew herself up as though ten years had fallen from her.

'Bestir yourself with the sale, find whatever money's needed and we'll set off for Antek on Tuesday or even tomorrow.'

'Antek's coming back! Antek's coming back!' she repeated unwittingly.

'Don't announce it at large! When he's back, they'll soon find out, and then you must say they let him go with a pledge: the blacksmith will leave you be then.'

He instructed her quietly. Hanka promised solemnly to tell only Józka of the secret, though she could barely suppress her tremendous joy. She went about as though drunk, kissing the children constantly, talking to the colt or the sow and teasing the stork, and when Łapa kept following her, whimpering and peering into her eyes, evidently sensing something, she whispered into his ear as though to another person:

'Quiet, silly – why, the master's coming back!'

And she laughed and cried by turn. She explained it all at length to Maciej, who stared with his frightened eyes and mumbled something with his tongue, and she forgot the whole blessed world, so that Józka had to remind her it was time to get ready for church. *Hej!* Carried away with happiness, she wanted to sing, to run and shout to the wheat, which bowed to her feet with a rustle, to the little trees, to the whole earth:

'The master's coming back! Antek's coming back!'

In her joy, she asked Jagna to come with her to church, but Jagna didn't want to, preferring to stay behind.

No one had told her about Antek, but she guessed everything easily from the half-spoken words and from all Hanka's doings. She too was elated by the news and a kind of joy stirred in her, a quiet hope, so that, ignoring everything, she ran to her mother's.

She arrived at a bad moment, in the very middle of a fierce dispute.

Right after breakfast, Szymek had sat down at the window with a cigarette between his teeth. Spitting into the room, he pondered and considered at length, glancing at his brother, until finally he declared:

'Well, Mother, give me some money, for I must take it for the banns. The priest said to come before vespers for the prayers.'

'And who might you be marrying?' she asked with a mocking laugh.

'Nastusia Golebianka.'

She did not reply, bustling intently around the pots and stove. Jędrek threw in some wood and, though the fire crackled, he blew on it from sheer terror, while Szymek, after waiting for the space of a prayer, piped up again, but more firmly now:

'Give us a round five roubles, there's the betrothal to throw ...'

'You've sent the vodka round already, eh?' she asked in the same tone.

'Klq̄b and Płoszka went.'

'And she took you, eh?' Her chin was fair trembling with laughter.

'Of course! ... She did, aye.'

'The blind chicken's landed on the corn: like she wouldn't, that slut!'

Szymek frowned, but waited to see what else she'd say.

'Fetch some water from the pond, and you, Jędrek, let out the hog, it's squealing ...'

They did so almost passively, and when Szymek again sprawled on the bench and the younger lad began to tinker with something under the griddle, the old woman ordered in a hard voice:

'Szymek, take the heifer some water!'

'Go do it yourself, I'm not your serving lass!' he snarled defiantly, sprawling even more on the bench.

'Did you hear me! Don't make me angry on a holy Sunday ...'

'And you heard what I said: give us the money, quick sharp!'

'I will not and I won't let you wed!' she burst out.

'I'll manage without your permission!'

'Watch yourself, Szymek, don't you mess with me.'

He leaned down suddenly in front of her and humbly clasped her legs.

'Why I beg you, Mother – look at me, whimpering like a dog!' The tears caught in his throat.

Jędrek too started roaring and kissing his mother's hand, clasping her legs and beseeching her alongside his brother.

She pushed them away in anger.

'Don't you dare oppose me, or I'll throw you to the four winds!' she shouted, shaking her fists.

But Szymek did not take fright. His mother's words dashed him like a whip, so that he drew himself up proudly, seething, and his inborn Pacze's obstinacy rushed to his head. Pacing the room, he said with terrible calm, fixing her with blazing eyes:

'Give me the money and fast! ... I've waited and I'll not ask again!'

'I will not!' she screamed, enraged, looking about for something to hand.

'Then I'll find it myself!'

Leaping towards the chest like a lynx, he ripped off the lid with a single yank and began tipping out all the clothing on to the floor. She leapt to the defence with a yell. At first she tried to pull him away, but as he did not yield an inch, she plunged her hand into his curls, and with the other beat him about the head and face, kicking his rear and shouting to high heaven. He brushed her off like an irritating fly and did not cease searching for the money, but, getting a blow in a soft spot, he shook her off with such anger that she fell the length of the room. In a flash she sprang up and, seizing the poker, again hurled herself at him. Not wanting this battle with his mother, he defended himself as best he could, trying to take the poker from her. Shouting filled the room.

Jędrek, beside himself with crying, ran round her whimpering pitifully:

'*Matulu*, for God's sake! ... *Matulu*!'

Jagna, entering just then, rushed to separate them, but in vain, for whenever Szymek evaded her and jumped aside, his mother would pounce on him again like a rabid bitch and wallop whatever part of him she could reach, so that, enraged with the pain, he began to retaliate. Locked together like dogs, they tumbled about the room, crashing against the walls and furniture with a terrible racket.

People began to run up from all sides, trying to separate them – but how, when she'd latched on to him like a leech and was beating him in a maddened frenzy.

Until he punched her between the eyes with his fist, grabbed her sides and threw her like a twig into the room. She stumbled and fell like a log with her whole weight on to the hot baking plate, between the full boiling pans; the stove collapsed and everything caved in ...

They retrieved her immediately from the rubble, of course, but though terribly burnt, and ignoring the pain and her smouldering skirts, she still struggled to get at him.

'Get out of here you, cursed villain! ... Out!' she roared, beside herself.

They had to put out the fire by force and hold her down, so that they could at least pile damp rags on her face, but still she yelled:

'Don't let me set eyes on you again ... don't let ...'

Szymek, meanwhile, barely breathing, beaten and bloody, could only gape at his mother. Fear caught at his throat. Shaking all over, he could not choke out a word and had no idea what was happening.

And barely had things quietened a little, when suddenly his mother broke free of the women, rushed to the pole beyond the range where the clothes were hanging and, tearing down Szymek's things, began throwing them out of the window into the orchard ...

'Get out of my sight! Nothing here's yours, everything's mine, not one strip of land will I give you, not one spoonful of food, though you be starving!' she yelled with the last of her strength.

Finally, exhausted and in acute pain, she fell down in agonized moaning.

They carried her to the bed.

So many people had arrived that they filled the room and were huddled in the hallway and pushing their heads in at the window.

Jagna was losing her head not knowing what to do, for the old woman was howling with pain ... Why, boiling water had tipped on to her whole face and neck, her hands were scalded, her hair and eyes singed so that she could barely see.

Covered in bruises, his face streaked with congealing blood, Szymek sat in the little orchard against the cottage wall, leaning his head on his fists as though turned to stone and listening to his mother's moans.

Mateusz soon came running and, pulling him by the hand, said:

'Come to mine. There's nothing here for you ...'

'I'll not go! The land's mine from my father – I'll stay on what's mine, I'll not give it up!' He spoke with grim stubbornness, unconsciously gripping the quoin with his fingers.

Deaf to all pleas and entreaties, he would not move from the spot and stopped speaking. Mateusz sat down by his side, not knowing what to do with him, while Jędretek, having gathered up the capotes, trousers and shirts that had been tossed out, tied them up in a sheet and put them timidly by his brother's side.

'I'll go with you, Szymek, into the world, I will!' he whimpered, crying dolefully.

'Son of a bitch! ... I've said I'm not moving and I'm not!' Szymek yelled, slamming his fists against the wall, so that Jędrzych cowered in terror.

They fell silent as renewed and terrible moaning resounded in the chamber: it was Ambrozyna seeing to the sick woman. He was dressing the scalded places with fresh, unsalted butter and then covering them with leaves on to which he poured soured milk before wrapping everything in damp cloths. Directing Jagusia to tip over cold water every prayer or so, he rushed off to church hurriedly, since the Angelus bell was ringing.

It was time for the High Mass. People were tramping down the road and carts rattled by. Many acquaintances looked in on the sick woman along the way, so that Jagna had to close the door to the curious, letting only Sikorzyna stay with her.

Soon all the noise had died away. Dominikowa grew quiet. The soft hum of the organ reached them from the church and the sound of voices singing wafted across the orchards in a sobbing, caressing flutter.

A grand old sun was beating down. The trees stood motionless in the hush of the afternoon. A branch trembled occasionally and shadows multiplied. The birds fell silent and, from time to time, the wheat's tawny mane rippled with a muffled rustle.

The boys were still sitting by the cottage. Mateusz was talking quietly, Szymek just nodding his head, and Jędrzych lay in front of them, gazing into the smoke of Mateusz's cigarette that rose above the thatch like a blue cobweb.

Jagna came out with a bucket to fetch water from the pond.

Mateusz got up then, promising to come again after dinner. He meant to go to church, but seeing that Jagusia was sitting by the water, he joined her. The bucket was full and she had her legs in the water.

'Jagusia!' he whispered quietly, stopping close by, under the alder.

She quickly dropped her woollen skirt over her knees and glanced at him, but her eyes were so tear-stained and so full of grief and sadness that his heart began to pound.

'What's up, Jagus? Are you ill?'

The trees swayed noiselessly, spilling a flood of flickering beams and shadows like green-gold rain over her bright head.

'Nay ... it's just that the world's none too sweet a place for me, no ...' She turned her eyes away.

'I could help you maybe, give some counsel ...' he said kindly.

'Ha? You ran away that time in the gardens and never turned up again ...'

'Because you hurt me! ... Did I dare? Jaguś ...' He was humble now, and kind.

'But I called after you, you didn't listen ...'

'Did you call then, Jaguś? Really?'

'I said, didn't I! ... Could have yelled my head off, and no one would have come rushing! ... Who cares about a waif? ... Everyone's ready to hurt you or abuse you!'

Her face was burning. She turned away in confusion and began to agitate the water with her feet. Mateusz too sat pondering.

Again the silence wove about them. The soothing hushed strains of the organ reached the shining pond and ripples lapped out in circles from Jagusia's legs like brindled snakes. Shadows swarmed along the smooth banks, and glances now began to fly between them and mingle ...

Mateusz felt himself drawn to her more and more strongly, so that he would have liked to pick her up like a child and caress and calm her with untold kindness ...

'I thought you were grudging towards me ...' she said very quietly.

'I were never crook towards you ... you must know that?'

'Ha, maybe before, once ... but now you're like the rest ... like ...' she whispered unguardedly.

A sudden memory jolted him, anger and envy rising up in him. 'Because you ... you ...'

No, he could not blurt out what was choking him. Restraining himself, he said, curt and grim:

'God be with you!'

He had to escape in order not to reproach her with the Voyt.

'Off, are you – what hurt have I done you now?' She was frightened and aggrieved.

'None ... no ... only ...' he said quickly, looking into her blue, tear-stained eyes, while pity, tenderness and anger tossed him to and fro. 'Just send that monster packing, Jaguś – get rid of him!' he begged abruptly.

'Did I lure him? Am I holding on to him!' she shouted angrily.

Mateusz stood unsure and greatly confused.

She was convulsed with weeping, tears spilling down her flaming face like peas.

'The wrong he did me ... got me that drunk ... and there's no one to speak for me ... no one's a drop o' pity for me, everyone's at me! But what am I guilty of? ... What?' she protested bitterly.

'I'll pay him back, the scum!' he exploded, raising his fists.

'Do, Mateusz! Pay him back, and I, I will ...' she repeated fiercely.

He did not reply now, but rushed towards the church.

She went on sitting by the pond a long time, thinking about Mateusz, that perhaps he'd stand up for her and wouldn't let her be wronged.

'And maybe Antek.' The thought suddenly came into her head.

She returned home, full of hidden but joyful anticipation.

The bells began to ring. Folk were coming out of church, the roads were soon swarming and resounded with the rattle of carts and conversations, the air ringing with laughter. They walked in groups, stopping by farmyards from time to time. Only before Dominikowa's cottage did people quieten a little, glance at each other and pass by with morose faces; no one even looked in on the sick woman.

Soon the whole village was alive with chatter – inside, in hallways, on thresholds. The orchards too were loud and busy as people sat down to dinner under the trees, in the cool and shade, so that everywhere folk were eating, and the scrape of spoons, the clink of bowls, the smell of food and the whining of dogs echoed in the quiet blistering heat.

Only at Dominikowa's was it dull and empty; no one was in a hurry to visit. The old woman moaned in the heat. Jaguś could sit still no longer: she stood on the threshold, or went into the road, or just stared for long periods through the window. Szymek, meanwhile, sat in front of the cottage, just as before. Only Jędretek did not lose his head but took himself off to the other side of the house to cook a meal.

It was some time after dinner that Hanka looked in on them, though she seemed odd somehow, asking about everything, fussing greatly over the sick woman and stealthily following Jagna with her eyes, sighing with concern.

Before long, Mateusz came hurrying to Szymek.

'Will you come to the Germans with us?' he asked.

'The land's mine, from my father, I'll not move from the spot,' the boy repeated stubbornly.

'Nastusia's waiting for you. You're supposed to have taken the money for the banns.'

'I'm going nowhere ... it's my land, from my father ...'

'You great stupid ass! No one's dragging you by the tail ... Sit there till tomorrow, for all I care!' He was angry, and since Jagna was just seeing Hanka off at the fence, he joined her, not even glancing at the former.

They took the road by the pond.

'Is Rocho back from the church?' he asked.

'He is. There are quite a few villagers waiting.'

He looked back. Jagna was watching, so he turned round hurriedly, and asked in a low voice without looking into her eyes:

'Is it true that the priest rebuked someone from the pulpit?'¹

'Why ask if you've heard?'

'I came after the sermon, they told me about it, but I thought they were fooling, for a laugh.'

'Weren't the only one he rebuked ... he was shaking his fists even ... Everyone's good at scolding loud and tossing stones ... but hindering evil, there's no one for that.' She was greatly troubled and angry. 'But not a word about the Voyt, and he's the guiltier ...' she added more quietly.

Mateusz swore violently and wanted to ask her more, but he didn't dare. They walked in silence, Hanka deeply upset by the whole business.

Aye, Jagna had sinned. Aye, she should be scolded, but to mention her straight off from the pulpit practically by name ... that was too much ... She was Boryna's wife, not some hussy ... she thought resentfully. What was between them was their affair, and others should mind their own business.

'He don't bring up Magda or the miller's lasses: and everyone knows what they get up to! And he don't shake his fists at the manor's maids. As for the squire at Gluchowo, the whole world knows how he beats his farmhands – the priest don't raise his voice there!' she said with the deepest outrage.

'Is it true that he mentioned Tereska? Eh?'

She could hardly hear the question, he spoke so low.

'Both of 'em; everyone marked who he was speaking of.'

'Someone must've talked him into it.' He could barely contain his indignation.

'They said it were Dominikowa's work, or maybe Balcerkowa. One of 'em's revenging herself on you for Szymek and Nastka, and the other wants to drag you off for her Marysia.'

'So that's where the crabs are wintering! Didn't even enter my head ...'

'Men only ever see what's right in front o' their eyes.'

'Wasting her time, Balcerkowa, wasting it ... She'll catch it from Tereska if she's not careful ... And Szymek must wed Nastka for sure, to spite Dominikowa, I'll make sure o' that! Wretched scum!'

'They do their scheming, and the innocent end up suffering,' she said sadly.

'And they set people upon each other so that it's hard to endure the village.'

'When Maciej were here, there was someone to appease 'em, someone they had to heed.'

'Aye, the Voyt's feckless, he's good for nothing and the things he gets up to, he's got no standing with the people. If only Antek would come back!'

'He will, soon. He will! But who'll listen to him?' Her eyes flashed.

'We've talked about it already, with Grzela and the lads, that when he returns we'll set the village right. You'll see!'

'About time: everything's falling apart like wheels without a linchpin.'

They reached the cottage together; on the porch, a group was already waiting. A dozen farmers and the best of the farmhands, although at first the whole village had insisted on going, as at the wood. They gathered, waiting impatiently for the rest.

'The Voyt should be going with us too!' someone remarked, paring a stick.

'The governor's summoned him to the *powiat*. The notary said that it were to call a meeting and approve a school in Lipce and Modlica.'

'Let 'em; we won't approve it!' Kłab said with a laugh.

'There'd be a new tax per morgen right off, just like in Doly.'

'For sure, but if the notary orders it, we have to heed it,' the Soltys remarked.

'Who's he to order us around? Let him order the gendarmes not to rob us like thieves.'

'You're starting off cheeky, Grzela!' the Soltys warned. 'There's many a one whose tongue has taken him further than he meant to go.'

'I can speak because I know our law and I'm not afraid of officials. It's just you, you ignorant sheep, whose legs tremble at the sight of any old scrap of official paper.' He yelled so loud they were taken aback by the gall of him and several felt their flesh crawl in alarm.

Kłab took up:

'In truth, such a school's no use to us ... My Adam went two years to Wola. I'd take the teacher a bushel of potatoes, the wife would give butter too, eggs for Easter, and after all that he couldn't even read the prayer book, and of Russian not a squeak nor a squawk ... The young 'uns who learned with Rocho through the winter can even make out writing and manage to read the gentry's books ...'

'Then talk with Rocho and let him go on teaching. The children need a school more than shoes,' Grzela broke in again.

At that, the Soltys pushed his way forward into the throng and began to speak in an undertone:

'Rocho would be best, that I know ... he taught my boys ... but can't be done. The officials must've sniffed something out already and have an eye on him ... The gendarme met me in the chancellery and questioned me closely about him ... I didn't tell him much, so he got mad at me and began insisting that he knew very well that Rocho were teaching the children and handing out Polish books and newspapers to the people ... He should be warned to be on his guard.'

'A bad business! He's a good man, pious, but trouble could befall the village on his account ... Something must be done ... and quick,' old Płoszka declared.

'Give him away out of fear, would you ... eh?' Grzela muttered bitingly.

'If folk were to rebel against the authorities and to everyone's harm, then anyone would do the same. You're young, but I well mark what happened in this war of the gentlemen, when they cut the peasants with whips for any old reason. It's not our cause.'²

'You want to be Voyt, and you're useless as a boot full of holes!' Grzela threw in.

They broke off, for Rocho was coming out of the cottage. Casting his eyes over the people, he crossed himself and cried: 'It's time – let's be off in God's name!'

He set off, and after him the peasants marched down the middle of the road, women and children trailing behind.

The scorching heat had faded now, and they were just ringing for vespers. The sun was rolling towards the woods and the sky hung fine and bright and so transparent at its rim that even the more distant villages could be seen clearly as though on the palm of the hand. In the green of the woods, the naked eye could make out the yellow trunks of pines, the white shrouds of birch bark and the huge grey oaks.

The women stopped before the mill while the men went slowly up the hill. Now and then, a capote flashed white through the dust that rose behind them.

They went on in silence, their faces grim, their expressions truculent, their eyes proud and defiant. They struck their oak staffs against the ground to rouse their spirits and sometimes someone would spit on his palms and flex his muscles as though preparing to spring.

The men proceeded in an orderly and dignified fashion, as though in a procession, and if anyone should pipe up with a word, he quickly fell silent under the reproachful gazes of the rest: it was not a time for chatting. Each one withdrew into himself and braced himself.

They sat down to rest a moment on the border mounds by the cross, but still no one spoke; they simply gazed about them quietly. The Lipce cottages were barely visible beyond the orchards. The golden cupola on the church tower shone in the sun, the fields stretching green as far as the eye could see. On the pastures by the forest scattered herds were wandering. A blue ribbon of smoke rose above the woods from some fire and children's singing rang out, while the playing of pipes spread over all the land arrayed in springtime, in joy, in a strange peace, so that many a man's heart swelled with sorrow and apprehension and many a man sighed heavily and glanced fearfully towards Podlesie ...

'Let's keep going, it's no small matter, after all!' Rocho urged, noting that they were beginning to quail.

They turned to head straight for the grange buildings, along an old lane, full of weeds, that lay like a flowery ribbon across the green wheat. Stunted stalks of rye were speckled blue with cornflowers, the late-sown oats were yellow with charlock and the scorched and softened wheat turning red with poppies, while the potatoes were barely sprouting. Abandonment and neglect were visible at every step.

'Jewish farming, pure and simple – it fair hurts to look!' someone muttered.

'The worst farmhand would till the land better!'

'A squire, yet he don't respect this blessed land!'

'It gets milked and milked, like a hungry cow, so no wonder it's grown barren.'

They emerged on to the fallow fields. The charred and ruined frames of buildings rose not far away. The burnt orchard, its trees like blackened skeletons stretching painfully towards the sky,

surrounded the manor workers' cottages³ with their collapsed roofs and jutting chimneys, while beside their walls, in the meagre shade of the trees' dead branches, a group of people could be seen. It was the Germans. A cask of beer was standing on the stones. Someone was playing a pipe in a doorway, and they sat sprawled on the benches and grass in only their shirts, pipes between their teeth, drinking from clay pots. The children frolicked near the house, and sturdy cows and horses were grazing nearby. They must have seen the men approaching, since they began to jump up and shield their eyes with their hands, looking towards them and shouting, but some old Kraut babbled something sharply, so that they soon sat down calmly in their places, taking slow

draughts from their mugs. The pipe whistled an even sweeter tune, the larks sang almost directly overhead, and the persistent, ceaseless chirping of crickets drifted from the wheat, while here and there the cry of a quail broke free.

And though the parched earth rang hollow beneath the peasants' feet, and the sound of their soles ringing against the stones came ever closer, the Germans moved not a muscle, as though they hadn't heard a thing, and were merely relishing their mugfuls of beer and that sweet breath of early evening.

The peasants were almost there, but they walked more and more heavily and slowly, suppressing their panting and gripping their staffs. Their hearts were thumping, a hot shiver ran down their spines, their throats grew dry, but their backs stiffened and they fixed the Germans boldly with their flashing eyes. Their stony faces radiated grim obstinacy and defiance.

'Praised be!' said Rocho in German, stopping, while behind him the band stood in a semicircle, pressing together shoulder to shoulder.

The Germans replied in chorus, without moving from their places. Only the old man with the grey beard rose and, pale now, cast his eyes around the throng.

'We've come to you on some business,' Rocho began.

'Then sit down, farmers – from Lipce, I see – and let us talk as neighbours! Johann, Fritz, benches for our neighbours.'

'God bless you, but it's a brief matter, so we'll stand.'

'It need not be brief when the whole village has come!' the other called out in Polish.

'Because it touches all equally.'

'Three times as many have stayed behind!' said Grzela with emphasis.

'We're pleased indeed, and since you are the first to come, then maybe you'll take a drink of beer with us ... to neighbourly concord ... Boys, pour it out ...'

'Swill it yourself, Mr Bountiful! We're not here for beer!' the hotter heads called out. Rocho silenced them with his eyes, and the old German said stiffly:

'Well, we're listening!'

Silence fell, but for the sound of panting and heavy breathing. The Lipce men shifted closer together, a shiver running through them all, and the Germans too stood as one, moving to face them in a tight band. They began to glare at the peasants with wrathful eyes, tugging at their beards, huffing and muttering something quietly.

The women looked fearfully out of the windows, the children hid in the hallways, while some massive russet-haired dogs growled by the walls. There they stood, facing each other in deepest silence for a good Hail Mary, like a herd of rams. Already rolling their bloodshot eyes and pawing the ground with their hooves, they were arching their backs and lowering their heads to charge with their horns at any moment, when Rocho intervened:

'We have come on behalf of the whole village,' he spoke in Polish, loud and clear, 'to ask you, if you would be so good, not to buy Podlesie ...'

'Yes! Aye! For that!' the peasants echoed him, beating their sticks.

The others stood, stunned.

'What's he saying? What does he want? We don't understand!' they spluttered, not believing their ears.

So Rocho repeated his words again in German, and he'd barely finished when Mateusz burst in heatedly:

'And that you, you knickerbockers, should go to the devil!'

The Germans leapt as though scalded with boiling water. There was uproar: they yelled, crowding together and jabbering fiercely, waving their arms and stamping their feet with anger. Several reached towards the peasants with their fists raised threateningly, but the peasants stood unmoved as a wall, eyeing them fiercely, though their hands shook and their teeth were clenched.

'Have you all gone mad?' the old man cried, raising his hands. 'You forbid us to buy the land! Why? By what right?'

Again, Rocho set it all out calmly, at length and in detail, but the German, flushing with anger, yelled:

'The land belongs to the one who pays for it!'

'That's how it may seem to you, but we see it differently. It should belong to the one who needs it,' he said solemnly.

'And how might that be – for free, perhaps, by robbery?' he scoffed.

'With these ten fingers, price enough!' Rocho replied in the same manner.

'Stupid talk! We're not wasting time on jokes. We've bought Podlesie, it's ours and will remain so, and if someone doesn't like it, let him go with God and avoid us from a distance. Well, what are you waiting for?'

'What for? To tell you: hands off our land!' Grzela erupted.

'Be off with you, before we see you off.'

'While we're still asking like neighbours!' others called out.

'Threatening us, I see. We'll take you to court! We'll find a way to fix you. You haven't yet done your time for the wood – they can add that on and you can do it in one go!' the old man mocked, but he was shaking with anger now, and the others too could barely restrain themselves.

'Cursed fleabags!'

'Bandits! Stinking dogs!' they yelled in their own tongue, writhing like a nest of trampled snakes.

'Quiet, sons-of-bitches, when men are talking to you!' cursed Mateusz, but they were not afraid, shouting louder and louder and shifting forwards in a group.

Rocho, fearing a fight, mustered the men, calming them and adjuring them to be peaceable, but they broke away, shouting over each other:

'Club 'im on the head, first one you reach.'

'They need a bit o' blood-letting!'

'Are we letting them get away with it, boys? They're insulting our people!'

'Will we not put our foot down?' others called, encouraging each other and edging closer and more threateningly until Mateusz brushed Rocho aside and stepped forwards in front of the Germans, like a wolf flashing his teeth.

'Listen here, you Germans!' he bellowed, extending his fists. 'We've spoken to you decent like, in good faith, and you threaten us with the slammer and mock us! Right, so now we'll play different! You don't want peace, then we say to you, before God and the people, as under oath, that you'll not settle in Podlesie! We came in peace, and you want war! Good, let it be war! You've courts behind you, officials behind you, money behind you, and we've got nowt but these bare fists ... We'll see who comes out top! And I'll add this, so as you remember ... as fire catches hold of straw, brick too will it devour, and snatch at unripe wheat ... cattle may drop down at pasture ... while no human being can escape misadventure ... You remember what I've said: war by night and war by day, and war in every place ...'

'War! War! So help us God!' the peasants boomed together.

The Germans leapt to the long poles standing against the wall. A few fetched out rifles, or snatched up stones. The women raised a clamour.

'Anyone shoots and every village will be here.'

'Shoot but one man, knickerbockers, and the rest will beat you to death like a mangy dog.'

'Don't you start, Kraut, for you'll not get the better of peasants.'

'And a hungry dog wouldn't touch your meat.'

'Try it, knickerbockers, try it,' they threatened arrogantly and provocatively.

They were standing close now, boring their eyes into each other, shifting from foot to foot, slamming their staffs and yelling vociferously, so that insults and threats flew overhead like stones, hands were already extended like talons and many a one was fair trembling and at the ready, when Rocho gathered his men and led them back. Willing or no, the peasants turned aside and watchfully, minding their backs, retreated, calling all the more mockingly over their shoulders:

'Go with God, pigspawn!'

'Just you wait till the red cockerel⁴ crows for you!'

'We'll look in to dance with your young ladies!'

Their mouths grew so foul that Rocho was obliged to subdue them.

Dusk was now settling on the ground. The sun had gone down and a chill wind was combing the wheat until it bowed, its ears ringing. The grass was growing damp with silvery dew, while the sound of pipes and children's shouts carried from the village and the croaking of frogs resounded from the swamps in the fragrant evening air.

The peasants returned slowly, their unfastened capotes fluttering like white wings. They walked along noisily, pausing every now and then. One man sang until the woods echoed, others whistled with pleasure or chattered, casting eager eyes over the Podlesie lands.

'These plots are easily divided!' said old Kłab.

'Aye, farms could be cut out like slabs of honeycomb, one into the next, and each with a meadow and pasture.'

'If the Germans will only stand aside!' said the Soltys with a sigh.

'Don't you trouble, we'll make sure they do,' Mateusz assured him.

'I'd take that land at the edge, by the road,' murmured the Pryczek's Adam.

'The middle bit for me, near the cross,' said another lad.

'I'm up for the bit towards Wola.'

'Wouldn't it be fine to get the garden plot at the grange!'

'Hark at the know-all, wants the best bit!'

'There's enough for everyone to have a portion,' Grzela pacified them, for they were ready to quarrel.

'If the squire agrees, and gives you Podlesie, there's solid work awaiting you, solid labour,' Rocho spoke up.

'We can do it! We can do all of it!' they called cheerfully.

'Come on! It's no great labour on your own land!'

'We'd manage all the squire's land!'

'Let them only give it us, and you'll see!'

'We'd sink ourselves into the ground like a tree's roots and just let someone try to pluck us out!'

So they talked among themselves, walking faster, for from the village a crowd of women were running towards them.

CHAPTER 11

The day was so far along that the whole wide world was blue as a ripe plum when Hanka rode up before the still-sleeping cottage, but at the sharp rattle of the britchka, the children tumbled out, shrieking. Łapa began barking joyfully and jumping up at the horses.

'And where's Antek?' Józka shouted from the threshold, pulling on her woollen skirt over her head.

'It's three days more before they'll let him go, but he'll be back, no mistake,' she replied calmly, kissing the children and handing out little dolls.

Witek too came flying out of the stable and the colt after him, whinnying and straining to get at the mare. Pietrek pulled the shopping out of the cart.

'Are they scything?' she asked, sitting straight down on the threshold to put the youngest to her breast.

'Five of them started yesterday at midday. Filip, Rafał and Kobus working in kind, and the Kłąbs' Adam and Mateusz hired.'

'Mateusz Gołąb? Well, I never ...'

'Aye, it were odd to me as well, but he wanted to, said he didn't want to get completely hunched with doing carpentry, and needed to straighten his back at the scythe.'

Jagna opened the windows on her side and looked out into the world.

'Is Father still sleeping?' said Hanka.

'Lying in the orchard. We didn't bring him in at night, it was terrible hot inside.'

'How's your mother?'

'The same, maybe a little better. Ambrozy's treating her. He came yesterday, and the shepherd from Wola. He censed her, gave us some ointment and says she'll be well in nine weeks, only she's not to go in the light.'

'That's meant to be the best way for burns!' Hanka replied. Then, switching the baby to the other breast, she began questioning them eagerly about yesterday's news, though but briefly, for it was nigh on broad daylight now. Trembling on the dawn air, daybreak had flushed the sky pink. Dew dripped from the trees and the birds twittered in their nests, while from the village came the bleating of a sheep, the lowing of herds being driven out to pasture and the thin sharp ring of someone honing a scythe.

As soon as she'd thrown off her things, Hanka ran to Boryna, where he lay in a cart-basket under the trees, covered with a quilt and sleeping.

'Guess what!' she whispered, tugging at his hand. 'Antek will be back in three days. They'd taken him to the gubernia.¹ Rocho followed him with the money. He'll pay the redemption and they'll come back together!'

The old man sat up suddenly, rubbing his eyes and seeming to be listening, but he quickly fell back on the bedding and, pulling the quilt over his head, appeared to fall asleep once more.

It was no use chatting with him, and just at that moment the haymakers were entering the farmstead.

'We did the meadow near the cabbages yesterday,' explained Filip.

'Go beyond the river today, by the mounds – Józka'll show you.'

'That's Duck's Hollow, a goodly bit o' land.'

'And grass to the waist like a forest, not like yesterday.'

'That poor, eh?'

'Aye, all but dry, like scything a brush.'

'Could be tossed today, when the dew's dried.'

They soon went off, Mateusz leaving last, having taken his time lighting a cigarette at Jagusia's side of the house and still looking back greedily, like a cat chased away from the milk.

From the other houses too they were beginning to come out for the mowing.

The sun had just emerged, huge and deep red. The day was growing warm and promised to be scorching once again.

The haymakers set off in single file, preceded by Józka trailing a beanpole. Someone was mumbling a prayer, another was still stretching and rubbing the sleep from his eyes, while someone else threw in the odd word. They passed the mill; low, thin mists lay on the riverside trees, with clumps of alder like smoking bushes, a flash of river beneath blue veils, grass bent under the dew and the warbling of lapwings here and there. The smouldering air from the east smelled of damp blossom.

Józka led them to the mounds, measured out her father's meadow and, after sinking her stick at its border, ran back home.²

Throwing off their spencers and rolling their trousers to the knee, they arranged themselves side by side and, pushing the shafts of their scythes into the ground, began to smooth the blades with whetstones.

'Grass looks grand, like a sheepskin – we'll be sweating today,' Mateusz said, taking first place and trying his scythe with a swing.

'Tall and thick – aye, they'll have plenty of hay!' said another, standing beside him.

'So long as they get it in while it's fine,' said a third, surveying the sky.

'When scything begins, rain loves to sneak in,' said a fourth, laughing.

'That were true in other years, but not this! Let's go, Mateusz.'

They crossed themselves together. Mateusz tightened his belt and straddled a little, bending his broad shoulders, then spat on his palms, took a deep breath and, with a wide swing, let the scythe fall, slicing again and again. The others followed him, in a slanting line so as not to clip each other's legs, and did the same, cutting into the hazy meadow, one after another, plying quiet even strokes of the scythe. The cold blades flashed with a whistle and the grass fell down, scattering them heavily with dew as though with tears.

The wind began to comb the grass gently and the lapwings cried plaintively above. Sometimes a partridge would whirl under their feet but they, rocking from their right side to their left, cut on indefatigably, advancing into the meadow, span by span. Only occasionally did someone stop to sharpen a scythe or straighten his back, and again they would slash doggedly, leaving an ever-longer swathe behind them and the traces of trampling feet.

By the time the sun had risen over the village, whole meadows were fair groaning under scythes. Everywhere they were mowing, everywhere blue blades glistened, the grate of sharpening resounded and the air was laden with the strong scent of wilting grass.

The weather was made for mowing, for, despite the old saying 'arrive with the scythe and the heavens soon cry', this year it had been the opposite. Instead of rains came drought.

Each day rose doused in dew, aglow like a man in a fever. In the evening it lay down yawning in the scorching heat, so that wells and little rivers dried up, the wheat yellowed, roots wilted, grubs set upon the trees, fruit fell unripe from the branch and cows ceased to give milk, returning hungry from scorched pastures, as the squire would only let those graze the clearings whose owners had paid five roubles a tail.

Aye, not everyone could tip that sort of cash out of their pockets.

But even without these diverse matters, the preharvest scarcity became ever harder, particularly for the hired hands and the rest of the poor.

They were counting on rain by the feast of St John³ and that everything in the fields might still improve. They even gave Mass offerings in this intention, but nothing helped – the drought went on.

Many a pot went empty, but instead there was no lack of quarrels nor strife and complaints. Indeed, it seemed to the eldest among them that there'd never been so many disputes in Lipce, as far back as they could remember. The lawsuit over the forest and the Voyt's affairs were forever on people's tongues. There was Dominikowa and her son, the Germans, and then smaller, neighbourly bickerings – so much of it that they almost forgot their hardship, living in a maelstrom of constant gossip and strife.

It was no wonder then that they breathed a sigh of relief as soon as mowing began. The poorest soon ran about the manors looking to earn, and the farmers, shutting their ears to every scrap of news, gladly took up their scythes.

But they did not forget about the Germans, for every day someone would run over to Podlesie to spy what they were doing.

They were still there, but had now stopped digging wells and fetching stone for the foundations. The blacksmith said one day that the Germans had sued the squire over money and Lipce for assault.

The peasants laughed heartily at this.

In fact, they discussed it that very day during the noonday meal on the meadows.

It was a sweltering afternoon, a white-hot sun stood overhead and the sky hung like a pale cloud in the inferno. The heat blasted as from a burning-hot stove. Not the faintest breeze stirred – the leaves drooped limply, the birds had fallen silent and shadows lay short and scant, giving little shelter from the heat. It was stifling. The mown hay gave off a sharp scent of burnt grass, while wheat, orchards and houses alike stood as though in the midst of white flames. Everything seemed to be melting in the hot glowing air, trembling like water simmering over a fire. Even the river

flowed more slowly, without a murmur. The water glistened like molten enamel and so transparent that every gudgeon could be clearly seen under the threading currents, every pebble on the sandy bottom and every crab rummaging at the edges in the luminous shadows. Stillness trailed its sunny, soporific yarn over the earth, the only movement that of the flies buzzing around people. The mowers sat down on the river bank, under a clump of lofty alders, eating out of their double pots. Nastka had brought Mateusz something to drink, while Hanka and Jagustynka brought something for the labourers. They sat on the grass in the sun and, covering their heads with their scarves, listened curiously to the mowers.

'Right from the beginning I said that, if not today then tomorrow, those Germans have to leave!' Mateusz declared, scraping at a pot.

'Priest says the same!' echoed Hanka.

'It'll be as suits the squire,' Kobus snapped, quarrelsome, stretching out under a tree.

'What, did they not take fright at your yelling and run away?' chipped in Jagustynka in that way of hers, but someone added:

'Blacksmith said yesterday that squire were ready to come to terms with us.'

'Seems strange to me that Michał's taking the village side now.'

'He's got a sniff of some good deal for himself,' hissed the old woman.

'And looks like the miller spoke for the village too at the manor.'

'Such patrons, all behind us now, the scum,' said Mateusz. 'I'll tell you why they're on our side: the squire promised the blacksmith a good perk for an agreement with Lipce. Miller got scared the Germans would stick a windmill up on the hill near the cross, while the innkeeper is helping folk out of fear for his own. He knows full well that wherever Germans settle, no Jew will make a living.'

'So the squire's scared of the peasants too, if he's trying to make peace?'

'You've guessed it, Mother. He's the most scared, and I'll explain why ...'

Mateusz paused as Witek had appeared, racing from the village.

'Missus, come quick!' he was yelling from a distance.

'What's happened? A fire or what?' She leapt up in alarm.

'It's the ... it's the master yelling something!'

She ran as fast as she could, not clear at all what had happened.

It was like this: since early morning, Maciej had been behaving strangely. He fretted and mumbled constantly, starting from the bed and hunting for something beside him, so that Hanka, on leaving for the meadow, ordered Józka to watch him more closely. The girl looked in on him often. He lay peacefully, and it was not until dinnertime that he started to shout to high heaven.

When Hanka flew up, he was still sitting on the cart rails and shouting:

'Where have my shoes gone! Hurry up with 'em.'

'They're fetching 'em from the storeroom, wait ...' she soothed him, frightened, since he seemed completely conscious and was glaring about fiercely.

'I've overslept, son-of-a-bitch.' He gave a big yawn. 'Broad daylight, and here I am asleeping. Tell Kuba to get the harrow ready, we're off sowing,' he ordered.

They stood before him not knowing what to do, until suddenly he leaned over and fell helplessly to the ground.

'Don't worry, Hanuś ... just dizziness ... Antek's in the field, eh? In the field?' he repeated when they laid him back on the quilt.

'Aye ... from daybreak ...' she stammered, fearing to contradict him.

He looked about sharply and talked all the while, but for every word to the point there were ten quite senseless. Again, he began straining to go somewhere, wanting to dress, calling for his shoes, or clutching at his head and moaning so dreadfully that he could be heard as far as the road. Hanka, sensing that the end must be approaching for him, ordered that he be brought into the house. Towards evening she sent for the priest.

He soon came with the Lord Jesus, but simply anointed him with the holy oil.

'He needs nothing more, he'll fall asleep at any moment ...' he said.

Towards evening quite a number of folk had gathered, for he seemed to be dying, and Hanka put the holy candle in his hand, but he calmed down somewhat and fell asleep.

The next day was the same. He recognized people, spoke consciously, then lay for whole hours like a corpse. The blacksmith's wife sat by him, not moving a step, and Jagustynka wanted to cense him.

'Give over, you'll end up starting a fire,' he grunted unexpectedly, and when the blacksmith rushed in at midday and looked into his half-closed eyes, he declared with a strange laugh: 'Don't you worry, Michał ... I'll not be long now ... not long ...'

He turned to the wall and said nothing more, but as it was clear he was weakening and slowly failing, they watched him all the time, and particularly Jagusia, who was acting strangely too.

She suddenly stopped going to nurse her mother, leaving her entirely to Jędrek, and sat rooted to the spot at home, next to her husband.

'I'll watch him myself – it's my right!' she said to Hanka and Magda so vehemently that they did not object, as each had plenty of work of her own.

Jagna did not move from the cottage again. Some dull fear held her as though she were bound, unable to run off from the sick man as before.

The whole village was out on the meadows. The mowing went steadily on. Folk wended their way to the fields from daybreak. As soon as the glow of dawn had brushed the sky pink, rows of men undressed to their shirts settled on the meadows like saddle-billed storks. Sharpening their iron tools and flashing their scythes, they mowed doggedly for days at a time, so that all that could be heard was the ringing of hammers on scythes and the singing of the girls as they raked.

The green lush meadow plains teemed with people, noise and clamour. Striped trousers winked and red woollen skirts flamed like poppies in the sun. Songs and scythes rang out, along with bursts of merry laughter, and everywhere the work flew, brisk and happy, and every day towards evening – when the reddened sun slipped down behind the woods and the air was thick with the cries of birds, when the wheat and grasses were trembling with the music of crickets, and the marshes resounded with the croaking of frogs, when scents exploded as though the whole earth were a thurible – the heavy carts, fat with hay, rolled along the roads and the mowers returned with them, singing joyfully. The stooks and ricks clustered on the yellowed, trampled stubble, like trusty old friends squatting for a quiet chat. Between them waded storks and lapwings circled above with plaintive cheeps while white mists came creeping in from the swamps.

Through the open window of Boryna's cottage, all the sounds of folk and fields crowded in, jubilant voices of life and labour, together with incense-like wafts of wheat and meadow and sun, but Jagusia was deaf to it all.

It was quiet in the chamber and lifeless. A greenish, sleepy murk drifted through the bushes that shielded them from the heat. Flies buzzed and Łapa, keeping watch by the master, yawned from time to time and went to fawn over Jagna, who sat whole hours without moving, like a pillar of stone. Maciej did not speak now, he didn't even moan. He lay peacefully and only his eyes darted constantly about; those bright eyes, shining like glass orbs, followed her with such tenacity and pierced her through like cold blades.

In vain did she turn away, in vain did she try to forget. His eyes watched her from every corner. They seemed to float in the air and shine so terribly, drawing her so irresistibly, that she submitted, gazing into them as though into a bottomless abyss.

And sometimes, as though breaking out of a terrible dream, she begged piteously:

'Why, don't look at me so, you'll drag my soul out of me – don't look!'

He must have heard her, for he shivered a little, his face contracting in some mute cry, while his eyes stared even more terribly and heavy teardrops rolled down his livid cheeks.

She would run out then. Fear drove her out.

From behind the trees, she gazed at the meadows, full of people and joyful noise.

And she walked away in tears.

She went to her mother's, but hardly had she poked her head into the dark chamber, barely had the smell of medicines wafted over her, than she hurriedly retreated.

And again she wept.

Or she went behind the house and cast her yearning eyes over the wide world. And then she cried even more sorrowfully, sadly and painfully. Like a little bird with broken wings left behind by the flock, she bitterly lamented.

And so day followed day without change. Hanka was forever preoccupied with the haymaking, like the whole village. Only on the third day did she stay at home from daybreak.

'Saturday, so today Antek must return for sure!' she said joyfully, preparing the house to receive her husband.

Noon passed, and still there was no sign of him. Hanka looked out beyond the church. She even went right out on to the poplar road, but it was empty and quiet there.

People began hurriedly to bring in the hay, since everything was pointing to a change in the weather. The cockerels crowed, the sun beat down even more intensely, heavy clouds hung at the edges of the sky and a wind was wheeling and rising.

They expected a storm and a downpour, and instead there was but a brief, though heavy rainstorm, swallowed by the parched earth in a flash, so that the only joy they had of it was the freshened air.

But a somewhat cooler evening followed, smelling of hay and soaked earth. Darkness lay thick along the roads. The moon was not yet up. The sky was dark and studded only with the odd star. The lights of cottages around the pond glimmered across the orchards like glow-worms. Everyone was eating supper on their thresholds, someone was playing a pipe and laughter rang out here and there. The birds were beginning to sing already and the fields echoed with the quiet clicking of grasshoppers and the voices of quails and corncrakes.

At the Borynas', they were eating outside too. It was noisy by the window and crowded, for since the mowing was now finished, Hanka had invited everyone, setting out a hearty supper. The air was filled with the aroma of scrambled eggs with chives and the brisk scraping of spoons, while Jagustynka's grating voice resounded at every moment, provoking outbursts of laughter. Hanka kept topping up people's bowls from the pans, urging them not to hold back, but she was listening with her whole soul for every sound from the road, running out at every moment to look from the fences.

There wasn't a trace of Antek. She met only Teresa clinging to the fence as though waiting for someone.

Mateusz, unable to get a word out of Jagusia, who was churlish today and contrary, had begun to quarrel with Pietrek out of irritation, when Jędrek came running for his sister, saying her mother was calling for her.

Soon, everyone dispersed. Only Mateusz dallied longer, so that it was a good prayer before he left.

A moment later, Hanka too went out, looking into the darkness in vain, when a surly, angry voice reached her from the pond:

'Why are you traipsing after me like a dog ... I'm not going to run off ... Tongues are wagging bad enough on our account already ...' and something even nastier so that only sporadic sobbing words and copious weeping could be heard in reply.

But Hanka was unmoved. She was waiting for her husband: what were the matters of others to her? Jagustynka was doing the evening chores, and since the baby was fretting, she picked him up and, rocking him, went to look in on the sick man.

'Not a sign of Antek!' she called from the threshold.

Boryna lay gazing into the lamp smoking above the fireplace.

'They let him out today, Rocho's waiting for him,' she repeated right into his ear, watching his lashes with joyful eyes, to see if he'd taken it in, but clearly even that news had not sunk in, since he neither moved nor glanced at her.

'Maybe he's coming into the village already ... maybe ...' she thought, running out every moment in front of the house. So sure was she of his return and so jittery with waiting that she was almost fainting. She would burst out laughing for no reason, dispute with herself and stagger about like someone drunk. She told her hopes to the darkness, and even confided to the cattle at milking, so that they would know that their master was returning.

And so she waited from minute to minute, but fast reaching the end of her strength and patience.

Night was falling, the village was preparing for sleep. Jagusia, back from her mother's, went quickly to bed. Soon the whole house was sleeping, while long into the night Hanka still watched before the house, until, all strength spent and with no tears left, she put out the lamps and went to bed too.

The whole world sank into deep silence and repose.

In the village, the lights went out one after another, like eyes engulfed by sleep.

The moon rolled out on to the high deep blue sky, sown with a spray of stars, and climbed ever higher, like a bird trailing its silver wings across the emptiness. The clouds slept here and there, wound into fluffy white clumps.

Meanwhile, on the ground, all creation lay exhausted in sweet quiet sleep. Now and then a bird trilled a torrent of song. The waters murmured as in a reverie. Wallowing in the moonlight, little trees trembled from time to time, as though dreaming of the day, or a dog growled or a nightjar flew past, flapping its wings, and a low haze began slowly and carefully to enfold the fields like a weary mother.

The sound of quiet breathing drifted from the barely discernible walls and orchards. People were sleeping in the open air, trusting themselves with confidence to the night.

A drowsy quietness lay over Boryna's room too. Only a cricket chirped in the fireplace. Jagusia's breathing fluttered like a butterfly's wings.

It must have been late into the night, when the first cockerels were beginning to crow, that Boryna suddenly shifted in his bed as though waking, and at that moment the moon splashed against the windowpane, flooding his face with silver light.

He sat up in bed and, nodding his head and working his gullet hard, he tried to say something, but there was only gurgling in his throat.

He sat there for some time, looking about vacantly, and occasionally fumbling with his fingers in the light as though wanting to gather into his fist the shimmering moonbeams that were dazzling his eyes.

'Morning's coming ... it's time ...' he muttered at last, getting up and standing on the floor.

He looked out of the window and, as though waking from a deep sleep, it seemed to him that it was broad day already, that he had overslept, that urgent tasks awaited him ...

'It's time to get up, time ...' he said again, crossing himself repeatedly and beginning his prayers. Looking about for his clothes, meanwhile, he reached for his shoes where they usually stood, but finding nothing to hand, he groped helplessly all about, forgetting everything, his prayer broken, and soundlessly mumbling only the occasional word.

All at once, his mind was a confusion of tasks recalled, long-ago matters or echoes of all that had been happening during his time of sickness. It ran through him in fleeting shreds, in pale recollections, in movements blurred as clouds on the stubble, which now suddenly awoke, churning in his mind, straining to emerge. At every moment he started after some phantasm, only to find that it fell apart like rotten yarn before he could grasp it, and his soul trembled, like a flame starved of air.

All he knew now was what dry trees might dream of in earliest springtime, that it was time to wake from their winter stupor, time to release the surging sap gathered within, time to hum the jubilant song of life on the winds, for they do not know that their dreaming is barren and all their deeds in vain ...

Whatever he did now, he did like a horse who, free at last after years going round on a treadmill, walks forever in a circle out of habit.

Maciej opened the window and looked out. He looked in the storeroom and, after much thought, scrambled in the range. Then, just as he was, barefoot and in his shirt, he went outside.

The door was open, the whole hallway flooded with moonlight. Łapa was sleeping on the threshold, curled in a ball, but at the rustle of steps he awoke, growled, then, recognizing his master, went after him.

Maciej stopped before the house and, scratching his ear, deliberated long and hard what urgent tasks were waiting.

The dog leapt joyfully up at his chest. He stroked him as in days past, looking about worriedly.

It was bright as day. The moon had risen high above the cottage, so that a blue shadow lay across the white walls and the water of the pond shimmered like a mirror. The village lay in deepest silence, except for the birds clamouring passionately from the thickets.

Suddenly he remembered something, for he went quickly to the farmyard. All the doors were open. The boys were snoring by the barn walls. He looked into the stable, patting the horses, who whickered to him. Next he poked his head in to glance at the cows; they lay side by side, with only their rears visible in the light. Then he wanted to pull the cart from out of the shed; he had even grabbed hold of the protruding shaft, but seeing the shining plough under the pens, he rushed towards it but then stopped, having forgotten what he was doing. He stood in the middle of the yard, turning to every side, because it seemed to him they were calling him from somewhere.

The well winch loomed in front of him, casting a long shadow.

'What's that?' he asked, listening for a reply.

The orchard, slatted in light, seemed to step into his path, the silvery leaves murmuring something quietly.

'Who's calling me?' he thought, touching the trees.

Łapa, walking at his side all the while, whined a little, so that he stopped, sighing deeply, and said cheerfully:

'True, little dog, it's time to sow ...'

But in a flash, he'd forgotten that too. Everything in his mind was running like dry sand through his fingers, except that new memories kept propelling him forwards. He reeled in these illusions like a spindle forever spinning thread but never getting anywhere.

'Aye ... time to sow ...' he said again, and setting off briskly around the shed through the farmyard towards the field, he stumbled upon that unhappy hayrick, burnt down back in winter and now rebuilt anew.

At first, he meant to avoid it, but suddenly leapt back. Things cleared for an instant. He was hurled like lightning back in time, and pulling up a stake from the fence, he brandished it in both hands like a pitchfork and hurled himself at the rick posts, his face grim, ready to strike and kill, but before he'd hit anything, he let the stake fall helplessly from his hands.

Behind the hayrick, beginning at the road and running alongside the potatoes, stretched a long wedge of stubble. He stopped in front of it, gazing with astonished eyes.

The moon was already halfway across the sky. The earth was basking in hazy streams of light and lay pearly with dew, in rapt silence.

An impenetrable hush emanated from the fields. The misty distances linked earth with heaven. White clouds crept from the meadows and drifted over the wheat like yarn, as though wrapping it in a warm damp fleece.

Greenish walls of full-grown rye were bent over the baulk under the weight of their ears, drooping like the ruddy beaks of nestlings. The wheat stood tall and firm now, glistening with black feathers, while the oats and barley, still barely sprouted, showed green as meadows in the fawny veils of mist and light.

The cocks were crowing for the second time, the night now far advanced. Sunk in the deep slumber of repose, the fields seemed to breathe with a quiet rustle and some echo of the day's cares and travails – as a mother breathes, resting at last among her children as they sleep trustingly on her bosom ...

Boryna suddenly knelt down on the patch and, holding out his shirt, began to gather earth, as though it were grain from a sack prepared for sowing, until, having gathered so much that he could barely hoist it, he crossed himself, swung his arm to try his reach and began to sow ...

He bent under the weight, and slowly, step by step, with that blessed sweeping motion, he sowed handfuls of earth along the field.

Łapa followed him, and like a frightened bird would dash from under his feet, run off and then return again to serve at his master's side.

And Boryna, staring straight ahead into that enchanted spring night, went quietly along the fields, like a phantom, blessing each clod of earth, each stalk, and sowed – sowed ceaselessly, tirelessly.

He stumbled over ridges, tripped over holes, sometimes he even fell, except that he was unaware of it and felt nothing other than that nagging and overwhelming need to sow.

He went right to the edge of the field, and when the soil to hand ran out, he gathered more and sowed, and when stone heaps and spiky shrubs blocked his path, he turned back.

He went far into the distance, where the birds' calls were broken, the whole village disappeared somewhere in the misty murk and an endless sea of tawny fields embraced him. He vanished into them like a lost bird, like a soul flying away from the earth – and then he appeared closer to the houses again, returning into the sphere of the twittering of birds, of human labours, silenced for a moment, as though he had been borne back to the edges of the living world by the rustling wave of wheat ...

'Draw the harrow, Kuba, easy now!' he called occasionally, as though to the farmhand.

And so the time went by and on he sowed, unflaggingly, stopping only to rest and briefly stretch his bones, and again he took up the barren work, that labour for nothing, those useless efforts.

And then, when the night had blurred a little, the stars grown pale, and the cockerels had begun their crowing before dawn, he slowed in the work, paused more often and, forgetting to gather more earth, sowed with an empty hand – as though he were sowing the last of himself on to these fields of his ancestors, all the days he had lived, a human lifetime, which he had taken and was returning, on these holy wheatfields, to God Eternal.

And in that last hour of his life, something strange began to happen. The sky grew grey as a coarse sheet, the moon went down, the whole world was suddenly blind and plunged into dark and swirling depths, and something quite incomprehensible seemed to rise and tread through the gloom with steps so heavy the earth seemed to rock.

A lingering, ill-omened murmur gusted from the woods.

Solitary trees trembled, a rain of dry leaves rustled over the spikes of grain, the grass and wheat were swaying, and from the low rippling fields rose a quiet fearful moan:

‘Master! Master!’

The green feathers of the barley shook as though weeping and clung with hot kisses to his exhausted feet.

‘Master!’ the rye seemed to whine, blocking his way and trembling with a hail of dewy tears. Birds cried mournfully. The wind sobbed overhead. Mists wound him in damp threads, and the voices kept growing, swelling, beating from every side, moaning ceaselessly:

‘Master! Master!’

He heard them at last and, looking around, called quietly:

‘Why, I’m here – what is it? Eh?’

It fell suddenly silent all around. Not until he moved to sow once more with his empty and now weary hand did the earth speak in one great chorus:

‘Stay! Stay with us! Stay!’

He stopped in astonishment. It seemed to him that everything was moving to meet him. The grass was crawling, the waving wheat was flowing, the strips were engirdling him, the whole world was rising and pounding at him, so that fear seized him. He wanted to shout, but could not force a sound from his tightened throat. He wanted to flee, but he had not the strength and the earth snatched at his feet. The wheat trammelled him, the furrows held him back, the hard clods caught at him, the trees threatened him, blocking his way, teasels tore at him, the stones wounded him, an evil wind chased him and the night confused him, along with those resonating voices – the whole world crying out from every place:

‘Stay with us! Stay with us!’

He suddenly froze, everything fell silent and stood still. A flash of lightning made him open his eyes in his deathly darkness. The sky yawned before him, and there in that blinding brightness, God the Father, sitting on a throne of sheaves, was stretching out his arms to him and saying kindly:

‘Come, dear human soul, to me. Come, come, my weary farmhand ...’

Boryna hesitated, spreading his hands, as during the Elevation.

‘Thanks be to God!’ he replied and fell on his face before the Most Holy Majesty.

He fell and died, in that hour of the Lord’s favour.

Dawn was rising above him, and Łapa howled, long and mournfully ...

PART IV

SUMMER

CHAPTER 1

And that is how Maciej Boryna came to die.

In the house, meanwhile, they slept in a little, on account of it being Sunday, until Łapa woke them with his barking. He yapped so, howling and scrabbling at the door, tugging at their clothes when they opened it and then running off, looking back to see if they were following, that Hanka felt a sudden foreboding.

‘Józka, take a look – see what the dog wants.’

She flew after him in good spirits, romping along.

He led her all the way to her father’s body.

She raised such a terrible cry that soon everyone came racing to the field to the old man, but he seemed grown quite stiff already, lying as he’d fallen at the moment of dying, face down and arms outstretched in a cross, as though gasping a final, fervent prayer.

They carried him to the cottage, still making efforts to revive him. But all their efforts were for nothing, in vain all help and remedies: it was but a corpse, a cold human corpse.

A cruel lamenting rose in the cottage. Hanka was screaming at the top of her voice, Józka was dashing herself against the walls and wailing. Witek sobbed, together with the children, and even Łapa howled and barked in the farmstead. All except for Pietrek, who, having hung about a bit, glanced at the sunshine outside and went off to sleep in the stable.

Maciej lay on his bed, stretched out and rigid, mouth gaping and smeared with soil, just like a clod of earth dried in the sun or a rotten log. He had handfuls of sand squeezed in his fists, while his eyes stared with such rapture somewhere far into the distance, as though into a heaven already wide open.

But death in all its awful horror emanated from him so powerfully, with a sadness so profound, that they covered him with a sheet.

The news spread around the village in a flash. The sun had barely sneaked over the cottages when people began to rush over to learn more. Again and again someone would come in, lift the sheet, peer into his eyes, kneel and say a prayer, while others, wringing their hands forlornly, stood in mournful silence, utterly stricken by this sign of God’s dominion over human life.

Meanwhile, the pitiful sobbing of the poor bereaved did not quieten for a moment, resounding throughout the whole village.

Ambrozy arrived at last, chased everyone out of the house, closed the chamber, and together with Jagustynka and Agata, who had shuffled in to pray beside the body, he set about attending to the dead soul. He always did so willingly and with plenty of banter, but today his heart seemed heavy.

‘So much for human happiness!’ he muttered, undressing the dead man. ‘The Reaper’ll catch you by the throat whenever he pleases and smack you across the jaw. You’ll turn your toes up at the priest’s byre and just you try resisting!’

Even Jagustynka seemed strangely gloomy, for she declared mournfully:

‘The poor wretch were but knocking about the world; it were better that he died.’

‘It’s not as though he met with any harm!’

‘But he didn’t see much kindness neither.’

‘And who feeds on that to their fill! The biggest squire, the king himself, he’s still got striving and suffering and all kinds o’ bother.’

‘He knew neither hunger nor cold is the most we can say of ‘im.’

‘What’s a bit of hunger, Mother. Troubles bite harder than anything.’

‘True, I’m no stranger to that myself! Jagusia cut ‘im to the quick, and his children didn’t spare ‘im neither.’

‘He had good children. He came to no grief at their hands,’ Agata put in, interrupting her loud prayers.

‘You best stick to praying. Aye, she’s praying for the dead and her ears are still cocked for gossip,’ growled Jagustynka.

‘Because bad children would not wail so. Just listen ...’

‘If someone were leaving you that much, you’d yell yer head off, and not be sparing your throat.’

‘Quiet, you both! Jagusia’s coming!’ Ambrozy hushed them.

Jaguś suddenly burst in and stood in the middle of the room as though turned to stone, unable to utter a word. They were just dressing Maciej in a clean shirt.

‘He’s dead!’ she moaned eventually, fixing him with frantic, frightened eyes. Fear gripped her throat and her heart seemed turned to ice, so that she could barely breathe.

‘Did you not know?’ Ambrozy asked softly.

‘I slept at Mother’s, and Witek’s only just come to tell us. Is he really not living?’ she asked suddenly, stepping towards him.

‘Aye, it’s the coffin we’re preparing him for, not a wedding.’

Unable to take it in, she leaned against the wall, for it seemed to her that she was lost in heavy sleep, that a phantom was choking her and, coated in sweat and fear, she couldn’t wake up. She kept coming in and out of the room, unable to tear her eyes from the corpse, or would jump up as though to flee, but stayed put. Then she’d keep running behind the house to the stile and gaze about the fields, seeing nothing, or she’d sit on the earth bench beside Józka, who was sobbing, tearing at her hair and wailing mournfully:

‘Oh, my dear *tanula*! Oh, my *tanula*!’

Aye, the house and whole farmstead heaved with wailing, lamenting and sobbing, and though every last bone in her body quaked and a heavy ache pressed beneath her breast, Jagna alone did not shed a single tear, could not manage a single cry of grief, but just wandered vacantly, eyes blazing in dismay.

It was lucky that Hanka was quick to pull herself together. Though still weeping, she was already taking care of everything and in charge as usual. By the time the blacksmith and his wife arrived, she was completely calm.

Magda burst into tears and it was just the blacksmith who asked questions. Hanka carefully recounted what had happened.

‘It’s good the Lord Jesus granted him an easy death!’ he whispered.

‘He’d suffered that much, he deserved it.’

‘Poor wretch, fled the Reaper all the way to the field!’

‘And when I’d looked in the evening before, he’d been lying quiet, same as always.’

‘And he said nothing, eh?’ he asked, rubbing his dry eyes.

‘Not a word. I tucked in the quilt, gave him a drink and went.’

‘And he got up himself! Maybe he wouldn’t have died if someone had been watching him,’ moaned Magda through deep sobs.

‘Jagusia was sleeping at her mother’s. The old woman’s very ill, with no change.’

‘It was meant to be and it happened! He’d been ailing that long – why, more than a quarter! And if health eludes you, better you should die. We should thank God that he’s not tormented any longer,’ the blacksmith declared.

‘Aye, and you know yourself how much the doctors cost, for a start, along with the medicine, and all for nothing.’

‘If someone’s mortal ill, no doctor can help.’

‘Such a farmer, such a wise ‘un, my Jesus!’ lamented Magda.

‘I’m only sorry that Antek didn’t see him alive.’

‘He’s not a child, so he won’t cry. Better think on the funeral.’

‘True, and no Rocho, to cap it all.’

‘We’ll manage ourselves. Don’t you trouble, I’ll sort everything.’

So said the blacksmith, who displayed a concerned face but was hiding something. Though he seemed to sigh and mourn and wipe his tears, he didn’t look Hanka in the eye. He set about helping Ambrozy with Father’s garments and ferreted for ages in the storeroom among the spools of yarn and junk, searching in corners or climbing up, ostensibly for the shoes that were hanging there. Though he sighed like a bellows, the scum, rattling out prayers louder than Agata and recalling the good deeds of the departed, his eyes were ceaselessly seeking something in the room, his hands crawling under the old man’s pillow or rummaging greedily in the bedstraw.

Until Jagustynka remarked waspishly:

‘Heaven forbid you find some withered thing in there ... and if you do, hold on, or it’ll slide out your grasp ...’

‘All things come to those who wait!’ he muttered and now began hunting as openly as can be, not even minding the organist’s Michał, who had arrived, panting, to find Ambrozy.

‘Come to church, they’ve brought four children for christening.’

'Let 'em wait. I'll not leave 'im undressed.'

'I'll help out, Ambrozy. You go,' the blacksmith urged him, as though wishing to be rid of him.

'I offered, so I'll do it. Another farmer of his ilk won't come my way any time soon. Do what needs doing in church, Michal, help me out. Get the godparents going round the altar with lit candles, then a grosz'll come your way. Learning to be an organist and can't even serve at a fool christening yet,' he retorted scornfully as Michal left.

Hanka had brought Mateusz to measure up for the coffin.

'Don't skimp on his casket. Let the poor wretch stretch out in death at least,' Ambrozy said sadly.

'My Jesus, all his voloks weren't room enough for him while he lived and now he fits inside four boards,' whispered Jagustynka, while Agata, breaking off her prayers, moaned tearfully: 'A farmer he was, and a farmer's burial he'll have, but many a poor soul don't even know under which fence they'll gasp their last breath. May eternal light shine upon him! May ...' She was overcome again.

To which Mateusz just nodded his head, measured the corpse, said a prayer and went out. Though it was a Sunday, he set to work immediately. Every kind of joiner's tool was to be had in the house, and dry oak planks had long been waiting upstairs. He soon set up a workshop in the orchard and toiled away, harrying Pietrek, who'd been sent to help.

The day had long since risen. A scorching sun shone cheerfully, and it had been baking hot since breakfast until all the fields and orchards seemed slowly to be subsiding in the white babbling heat of simmering air.

The leaves on the small drooping trees stirred a little in the searing swelter, like the wings of a drowning bird. A feast-day silence engulfed the whole village and little stirred except for the twittering swallows flitting crazily over the pond. Carts began to rattle along the road, raising grey clouds of dust, and people from nearby villages headed for church. Every so often someone would slow their horses or stop in front of the Boryna house, where the family sat weeping, and they'd praise God and sigh mournfully, peering inside through the open door and windows.

Ambrozy bustled about, hot and perspiring, as he prepared the dead man. They'd already taken the bed into the orchard and hung the bedding along the fences when he called to Hanka to bring juniper berries for burning to fumigate the house.

But she did not hear him, and wiping away the last tears as they dripped of their own accord, she now watched the road constantly, expecting Antek at any moment. The hours went by and still he did not come, until she was on the verge of sending Pietrek to town for news.

'Nay, he'll only tire the horse and learn nothing ...' Bylica told her, who had just arrived with Weronka.

'Surely the officials will know something?'

'Oh aye ... they'll know ... but for one, they're closed today, it's Sunday, and second, who learns owt without crossing someone's palm?'¹

'I can't stand this,' Hanka complained to her sister.

'You'll have your pleasure yet. He'll still give you hell,' the blacksmith hissed, glancing at Jagusia, sitting by the wall.

'May your evil tongue stiffen,' Hanka muttered.

'It's hard to hurry when your pegs are still heavy after the stocks,' he threw in mockingly, angered by his futile hunt for money.

She said nothing, looking out into the road again.

The bells were just ringing for the High Mass. Ambrozy was getting set for church, ordering Witek to rub Boryna's boots with tallow since they had dried out and could not be pulled on to his feet.

The blacksmith and Mateusz went off to the village together, followed by Weronka, taking her father and the children. Only the women were left in the cottage, along with Witek, who was greasing the boots at his leisure, warming them well before the range while he kept running in to look at the master or at Józka, who was sobbing ever more quietly.

All commotion along the road had ceased as people had now reached the church. At the Borynas' it had grown completely quiet, but for the voice of Agata, which drifted through the open doors and windows like the twittering of a bird as she recited the litany for the dead, together with puffs of smoke from the juniper berries Jagustynka was burning to fumigate the chamber and hallway.

The service soon began; the sound of singing from the church and the playing of the organ circled and fluttered in the noonday hush, high and distant but sweet.

Hanka, unable to settle anywhere, went all the way to the stile to say her prayers.

'He's died then, he's died!' she thought mournfully, fingering the beads of her rosary, but the prayer foundered on her lips. Her head and heart were full of a twisted tangle of motley thoughts and not inconsiderable fears.

'Such a farm – thirty-two morgen, pastures, wood, buildings, livestock!' She sighed, taking in the wide fields and God's whole world with pleasure.

'If we could buy 'em off and keep it all! To be like Father was!' Glancing boldly into the sun itself, she swelled with sudden pride, smiled tellingly to herself and with a heart full of sweet expectations began to whisper the words of the rosary.

'I'll not budge over even half a volok. Half the cottage is mine and I'll not let those milch cows out o' my hands,' she exclaimed a little ruefully.

She sank back into her prayer for a long moment, gazing with tear-filled eyes at the land shining in the sun as though dressed in gold, at the rustling ripe pendants of lush russet rye, the blackish barley glittering like deep water, and the bright green oats, densely intergrown with yellow charlock, quivering as they basked in the quiet, warm air. Some great bird hovered over the clover, spread like a crimson shawl over the upper slopes, while here and there flowering beans watched over the potatoes with a thousand white eyes, and flax flowers of the palest blue were dotted about the hollows, like the eyes of children, squinting in the glare.

The world seemed utterly miraculous. The sun grew hotter and the warmth, saturated with the fragrance of countless flowers glowing among the crops and all around, came floating from the fields with such lovely and sustaining power that her soul fair brimmed with joy and tears sprang to her eyes.

'Blessed you are, and our very own! Blessed ...' she exclaimed, bending her head.

The Angelus bell twittered in the air like a bird.

'The whole world is thanks to you, dear Jesus! All thanks to you!' she whispered fervently, resuming her prayer.

Something rustled close by and she looked round warily. Jagusia was leaning over the wicker fence under the cherries and sighing mournfully.

'Is there not a moment's peace to be had!' lamented Hanka as memories suddenly lashed her like stinging nettles. 'True, aye, she's got the settlement!' she recalled. 'A whole six morgen! Thief that she is!' Her guts fair churning with resentment, she turned her back on Jagna, but could not manage to collect herself again, for ancient wounds and griefs assailed her like angry yapping dogs.

The afternoon was slipping away. Thin shadows began to crawl out from under trees and houses, and grasshoppers chirped in the crops as they turned slightly towards the sun, while here and there a bumblebee buzzed or a quail piped.

But the heat intensified and was scorching mercilessly now.

The High Mass soon ended and the women crowded by the pond to take off their boots.² As the road was teeming with people, carts and commotion, Hanka quickly returned to the cottage. Boryna was now completely ready.

He lay in the middle of the chamber, on a wide bench covered in a sheet and surrounded with burning candles. He was washed, aye, combed and shaved clean, with a long scratch from Ambrozy's razor on his cheek, covered with paper. His garb was of the best: the white capote he'd ordered for his wedding to Jagna, striped breeches, and boots that were almost new.

He held a picture of Our Lady of Częstochowa in his dry work-worn hands. A tub of water stood under the bench to cool the air, and juniper berries smoking on clay lids filled the chamber with a bluish haze permeated with the terrible majesty of death.

Thus in all solemnity and deathly silence lay Maciej Boryna, a just man and a wise one, a true Christian, a farmer like his father and grandfather before him, and the wealthiest man in the village.

Under the roof of his fathers he had laid down his weary head for the last time, like a bird resting in warm climes before it embarks upon its heavenly flight and soars to that place whither all have flown since ages past.

Prepared he was now to bid farewell to his friends and kin and make ready for that long journey. His soul was already bowing before the Lord's judgement and it was only this miserable corpse, this human carcass devoid of living breath, that lay there, as though smiling faintly, among the candles, juniper smoke and ceaseless praying.

People came now; in an endless stream they came. Some sighed mournfully, some beat their breasts and prayed ardently, some meditated, nodding their heads sadly and wiping away a sorrowful heavy tear, so that the whisper of prayers, muffled sobs and sighs and murmurs trembled like the poignant drizzling of autumn rain. In and out people came without a pause. Farmers and hired hands, women and girls, the old and the young, the whole of Lipce crowded into the room and hallway, while so many children pressed at the windows and skipped about that Witek, unable to chase them away, set the dog on them. But Łapa wouldn't obey and stayed close to Józka. He just ran around the cottage sometimes, howling like an idiot.

This death of Boryna weighed upon the whole village. The weather was beautiful that day, full of sunshine, fragrant with springtime and lovely beyond telling, but a strange sadness enveloped the houses and a strange silence encompassed all the lanes. Dejected, gloomy and sorely distressed, people went about sighing mournfully and spreading their hands as they pondered the sad fate of every human being.

Many who'd been close friends with the departed remained in front of the cottage, where some housewives were already consoling Hanka, Magda and Józka, weeping with them in the goodness of their hearts, greatly lamenting over these abandoned waifs.

Only Jagusia did no one approach with a kind word of comfort. Not that she hungered for pity, that one, but still the neglect hurt. She ran off to the orchard and sat holed up in the thickets for whole hours at a time, listening to Mateusz work on the coffin.

'That she even dare show her face!' the Voyt's wife hissed after her.

'Leave off! It's no time for such reproaches!' someone said.

'Let the Lord Jesus judge her,' Hanka added mildly.

‘The Voyt’ll reward her well for your taunts.’ The blacksmith sniggered. It was lucky that the miller had sent for him just then, as the Voyt’s wife swelled like a turkey hen, ready to start a quarrel.

The blacksmith merely burst into loud guffaws and rushed off, while they remained, talking half-heartedly of this and that, growing quieter and sleepier all the time, as though after heavy tribulations or due to the heat itself, which now tormented them almost unbearably. It grew humid too and strangely stifling, without even the slightest breeze, so that not a single leaf or blade stirred, and though a fair few hours had passed since noon, still the sun’s roasting heat beat down like living fire, so that even the timbers in the cottage walls wept resin and the weeds and flowers drooped and wilted.

A sudden plaintive drawn-out bellow was heard. Some peasant was leading a cow along the other side of the pond.

‘Must be off to the priest’s bull!’ said Ploszkowa, her eyes following the cow, tugging at its halter.

‘The miller roars even louder, out of anger!’ began Jagustynka, but the rest didn’t feel like talking.

They sat spread out like chickens in the sand, barely breathing with the heat, enervated by the swelter, the silence and the tearful, never-ending murmur of Agata’s prayers at the dead man’s side. Not until the bell rang for vespers did they head for home, while Hanka sent for the blacksmith to come to the priest with her to arrange Father’s burial. Witek quickly returned, but alone.

‘Ha, I were scared to go in. Michał’s at the miller’s sitting with the squire, all of ‘em drinking tea,’ he said breathlessly.

‘With the squire?’

‘Aye, I do know which one he is! They’re drinking tea and eating cake, I saw right well. And the stallions are standing in the shade pawing the ground.’

She was surprised, but with vespers over and still no blacksmith, she put on her best clothes and prepared to set off for the presbytery with Magda.

The priest was not in his rooms, though all the doors and windows were open wide. They sat down to wait, but after some time the serving girl came to say that the priest was outside and had said to summon them.

He was sitting by the fence in the shade. In the middle of the yard, a peasant was holding a bonny-looking cow on a short tether, while a burly piebald bull that the farmhand could barely restrain on his chain hovered and bellowed nearby.

‘Walek! Wait a moment, let him get in the mood!’ shouted the priest, and wiping his sweaty bald head, he called the women over and began to question them, cheering and comforting them compassionately. When they asked about the burial and costs, he interrupted them sharply and with impatience.

‘Later, I don’t short-change. Maciej was first farmer in the village, so he cannot have any old burial. No, I say, not any old burial!’ he repeated sternly, in that way of his.

They could but clasp his legs, not daring to oppose him in anything.

‘I’ll give you what for! Hark at them, the rogues!’ he shouted at the organist’s children, who were gaping through the fence. ‘Well, how do you like my bull, eh?’

‘A beauty! Better than the miller’s!’ Hanka affirmed.

‘As an ox to a carriage, his next to mine! Just take a look at him!’ He led them closer to the bull, who was now straining to get at the cow like a mad beast, and patted him with satisfaction.

‘What a neck! And his back! What a chest! A dragon, not a bull!’ he cried, all but panting with pleasure.

‘Aye, I’ve not seen one like it before.’

‘Ha, true! Pure Holstein, three hundred roubles he cost.’

‘That much money!’ They were amazed.

‘Not a grosz less! Walek, let him go ... careful now, the cow’s none too sturdy ... He’ll cover her in one go ... He’s dear, for sure, but I take only a rouble and twenty tether money, so that Lipce should raise decent cows. The miller’s cross at me, but I’m tired of the runts you get from his sire. Hold the cow right by the head, you dolt, or she’ll break free!’ he yelled at the boy. ‘Well, go

with God,’ he turned to the women, seeing that they were turning aside a little, abashed. ‘And tomorrow reception of the body at the church!’³ he called after them, preparing to assist the boy, since he was struggling to hold the cow.

‘You’ll thank me for the calf. It’ll be unlike any you’ve seen yet. Walek, walk him round, let him cool down, though what’s one fly to a dragon like that!’ he praised the beast.

The women went on to the organist’s, for they had to arrange with him separately about the funeral. Since the organist’s wife received them with coffee and they settled down to a chat, it was already almost dusk and the were cows coming back from pasture when they returned to the cottage.

On the porch, Pan Jacek was puffing on his pipe and seeking to engage Mateusz to cut and plane the wood for Stacho’s cottage. Mateusz seemed none too pleased, seeing as he was trying to wriggle out of it.

‘I’ll cut the wood, it’s no big job, but building the house, I don’t know ... Maybe I’ll be on my way ... I’m tired of this village ... I don’t know what I’ll do ...’ he said, glancing at Jagusia, milking a cow by the byre. ‘I’ll have done with the coffin in the morning, so we can talk then,’ he added quickly and left.

Pan Jacek went in to the dead man and said a long heartfelt prayer, wiping away copious tears.

‘May his sons take after him,’ he said to Hanka afterwards. ‘He was a good man and a true Pole. He was with us at the uprising. He joined our party freely and did not spare himself. I saw him in action. And he was ruined on our account ... A curse hangs over us ...’⁴ He spoke as though to himself, and though she understood nothing of it, still she clasped his legs from gratitude for his kind words in memory of the departed.

‘Come now! I’m a human being just as you are!’ he cried angrily. ‘Foolish woman! A squire is not a saint!’ Glancing at Boryna again, he lit his pipe at a candle and went out, not replying to the greeting of the blacksmith, who was just coming into the hallway.

‘Haughty today! Old beggar!’ the smith observed with irony, before sitting down next to his wife and whispering gleefully: ‘The day’s ours! You know, Magdaś, the squire wants to make peace with the village. He’s urging me to give him a hand. Aye, we’ll not do badly out of it. But mum’s the word, woman. Great matters are afoot.’

After looking in on the dead man, he hung around for a bit and then rushed off to the village, inviting the men to confer at the inn on his way.

Dusk was falling, the light cooling in the gloaming like rusty sheets of tin sprinkled with ash, and a little cloud glowed here and there, brimming with the golden brightness of the sunset.

When evening had completely descended and the farm’s chores were done, the whole family gathered around the dead man. Boryna’s bedside grew brighter in the glow of candles. Trimming the wicks again and again, Ambrozy sang from the prayer book, and they all repeated the words after him, sobbing and keening by turn.

Meanwhile, the neighbours – since it was crowded and stifling in the chamber – knelt outside, under the windows, droning the long sorrowing notes of the litany, so that the whole orchard seemed to be singing.

Night drew in slowly and all had grown utterly quiet by the time people began retiring. White bedclothes gleamed in the orchards. Cottage lights went out one after another, the only sound the occasional uneasy crowing of a cockerel, and the silence so close and humid it seemed to herald a change.

They went on singing beside Boryna late into the night, until only Ambrozy and Agata were left to keep vigil until morning. At first they sang aloud, but when all movement had ceased and the fathomless silence of night had fallen, their heads began to grow heavy, tormented by sleep. They began to drone and mumble ever more quietly, not even starting when Łapa came in whining and licked the dead man’s greased boots.

Almost exactly at midnight, a thick darkness engulfed the earth. The stars went out, the sky clouding over completely, and the silence seemed deeper still, but for a tree trembling now and then, a hushed timorous rustle or a strange cry – neither shout, nor hoot, nor distant call – that echoed suddenly and subsided who knows where ...

The village lay slumbering as though at the very bottom of the darkness. Only Boryna’s chamber shone faintly in those gloomy depths, and through the open window Maciej could be seen lying amid the yellow light of candles, shrouded in a blue cloud of incense. Leaning their heads against him, Ambrozy and Agata were now sound asleep and snoring loudly.

Meanwhile, the short summer night went quickly by, as though hurrying to get somewhere on time before the first cocks crowed. One by one, the candles too burned down, going out like eyes closing, weary of watching over the dead man, so that only the fattest was still alight at daybreak, its flame winking like a golden blade.

At last the grey misty dawn, lingering lazily over the fields, peered in at the chamber, straight into Boryna’s face, which seemed to liven a little, as though he were waking from a deep sleep, listening to the first chirrups from the birds’ nests and looking through darkened eyelids into the still-distant glow in the east.

Dawn filled out, shaking itself like a flurry of snow. The sky brightened like linen bleaching in the hot sun and a chill wafted from the fields. The pond sighed, lapping sleepily, while from under the gloomy mildew of night the outline of woodland appeared, like black clouds rising from the ground, and individual little trees emerged, standing alone, preening their tips like bunches of black feathers in the whitened air. Even the first wind had now flown in, agitating the orchards and beginning to scour the bodies sleeping on earth benches.

But hardly anyone woke yet or opened their eyes. All lay in sweet slumber, lazing a little, in the customary way after a holiday or fair.

Daybreak came quickly, though somewhat misty and sad. There was no sun yet, but the skylarks were trilling their prayers already. The waters gurgled louder and the wheat swayed, beating its crisp ears against the balks and lanes. The plaintive bleating of sheep could already be heard from their pens. Geese honked irritably, cockerels screeched loudly and calls had begun to resound, gates creaking and horses neighing. Everywhere was movement and the bustle of rising as the whole village awakened and slowly set about its daily labours. But at the Borynas’, meanwhile, it was still quiet and peaceful.

They’d slept in after their woes and heavy tribulations, and their snoring could be heard as far as the farmyard. The wind kept rattling at the open door and windows. It tumbled about the rooms with drawn-out whistles, snatching at the flame of the last candle and ruffling the dead man’s hair in vain.

For Boryna did not move, did not waken, did not spring to work or chivvy others. He lay lifeless, quiet, turned to stone and deaf to everything.

Gusting with some force now, the wind clattered about the orchard, so that everything began to sway, rustle, shake and toss, seeming to peer inside at Boryna’s livid face. The misty day gazed at him, the waving trees peeped in and the hollyhocks, like slender pliant girls, leaned across the window in deep curtsies. A bee strayed in, humming, a butterfly flew straight at the candle flame, a swallow blundered in, twittering in alarm, flies buzzed, and beetles and small creatures of every kind came crawling in and filled the room with quiet whirring, humming, fluttering and chirping, all crying in a single voice of living, heartfelt woe:

‘He has died! Died! Died!’

Every living thing seemed to tremble, whimper and sob as though in terrible stifled lamentation, then suddenly all was timorously stilled. The wind dropped. Everything held its breath and fell on its face in the dust, for out of the greyness of dawn a huge red sun had risen. It rose above the world, encompassing it with a glance from its sovereign life-giving eye before hiding in the great shaggy clouds.

The world turned grey and, in less than a Hail Mary, an abundant fine warm rain had begun to fall, so that soon all the fields and orchards rang with the ceaseless patter of its tiny drops.

It grew markedly colder. The roads were fragrant, birds began to sing with all their might, and in that thick trembling cloud that veiled the world everything drank its fill: the thirsty crops, the drooping leaves, the trees, the dried throats of streams and the parched earth – they all drank at length and with pleasure, gasping as though in gratitude.

‘God bless you, Brother Rain! God bless you, Sister Cloud! God bless you!’

It was the lashing rain that woke Hanka, sleeping right by the window, so that she was first to leap out of bed. She ran with a cry to the stable.

‘Pietrek! Get up! It’s raining! Run – heap up the clover, or it’ll soften to nothing! Witek, you layabout, go fetch out the cows! They’ve already taken ’em from the village!’ she called sharply, opening the stalls to let out the geese, which ran out to slosh in the puddles, honking joyfully. She was checking the cows and chasing the pigs outdoors when the blacksmith rushed in. They arranged what should be bought for tomorrow’s wake. He took the money and was about to leave for town immediately when he called her from the britchka and said quietly:

‘Hanka, give us half, and I won’t breathe a word that you fleeced the old man. Let’s do this friendly-like.’

Flushing red as a beetroot, she shouted impulsively:

‘Go tell whoever you like! Hark at him, ready to pull a fast one himself and thinks everyone’s just the same.’

He just flashed his eyes and plucked at his moustache before whipping on the horses.

Hanka, meanwhile, threw herself into work. With so much farm business awaiting her, it took a sturdy arm and a keen head to handle it all, so that very soon, as every day, her directions could be heard echoing all over the homestead.

They lit two new candles for Boryna and covered him with a sheet. Agata mumbled prayers beside him, scattering more juniper berries on to the coals from time to time. Jagusia did not return from her mother’s until after breakfast, but as the dead man filled her with terror, she lingered in the farmyard, looking in often on Mateusz, who had moved the work to the threshing floor. He had already finished the coffin and was about to paint a white cross on it when Jagna appeared at the barn doors.

She was silent, staring at the black lid with alarm.

‘You’re a widow now, Jaguś, a widow!’ he whispered with compassion.

‘Aye, indeed,’ she replied very quietly and tearfully.

He looked at her kindly. Gaunt she was, and white as a communion wafer, and so pathetic, like a wronged child.

‘That’s human fate for you,’ he said sadly.

‘A widow! I’m a widow,’ she repeated and tears filled her blue eyes. Heaving such deep sighs it was a wonder her breast didn’t burst, she fled behind the cottage and, ignoring the rain, cried there such a long time and so dolefully that Hanka herself brought her inside, trying to calm and cheer her.

‘Crying’ll help nothing. It’s not easy for us neither, but for you, for sure it’s harder still, poor waif,’ she said kindly.

‘Crying is as crying does, but before the year’s out, I’ll be singing her such a new hop-song she’ll be frantic,’ piped up Jagustynka.

‘It’s no time for scoffing,’ Hanka rebuked her.

‘I’m telling the honest truth – ain’t she young, beautiful and rich! She’ll have to keep the lads off with a stick.’

Jagna did not reply, while Hanka took the piglets’ feed out to the yard and looked into the road.

‘What can have happened?’ she thought, distraught. ‘They were supposed to have let him go Saturday, and it’s already Monday and there’s neither sight nor sound of him.’

But there was no time for these vexations; she had to help heap the rest of the hay and all of the clover, since the rain was properly coming down now, not stopping for even a moment.

Early that afternoon, the priest and organist came by, and the confraternity with candles. A few people gathered and they put Boryna into the coffin. Mateusz hammered it shut with wooden pegs, the priest recited the prayers, sprinkled the holy water and they took him away, singing quietly, to the church, where Ambrozy was already tolling the funeral bell.

And when they returned from the reception of the body, it seemed so empty somehow in the cottage and so terribly quiet that Józka burst into tears, and Hanka remarked to Jagustynka, who was tidying the room:

‘He were like a corpse for that long, but still you felt there were a master in the house.’

‘Antek will come back and be the master,’ fawned the old woman.

‘If he’d only hurry up.’ She sighed longingly.

But looking out at the earth swathed in damp grey veils and at the unceasing rain, she wiped away her tears, sighing once or twice, and off she went to chivvy her household.

‘Come on, people! Even if the greatest man dies, he’s but a stone in the deep sea – no one’ll fish him out, and the earth won’t wait and must be worked.’

She led them all over the stile to earth up the potatoes, while Józka remained alone to watch the children, because she felt ill and could not yet console herself in her grief. Łapa too watched by her side without pause, and Witek’s stork stood on the porch on one leg, as though on guard.

And the rain did not cease for one moment. As it tumbled down, fine and warm, the birds stopped singing and every kind of creature subsided into silence while the whole world slowly grew mute and seemed to be lost in listening to that constant deluge of drumming and tinkling, with only the geese honking now and again as they splashed in the livid foaming puddles.

It was sunset before the sun looked out, aflame, and lit red fires in the raindrops and puddles.

‘Sure to be good weather tomorrow!’ folk said as they trailed back from the fields.

‘Another downpour’d be good. It’s pure gold, not rain.’

‘The potatoes were on their last legs.’

‘And the oats near scorched!’

‘It’ll do everything good.’

‘We could do with three more days at least of it,’ someone added, sighing.

The steady peaceful torrent of rain continued until night-time. It was a pleasure to stand outside the cottages in the cool fragrant air. The Gulbas boys yelled to the other lads and the lasses to hurry to the hillside beyond the village to light the midsummer bonfire, since it was the eve of St John.⁵ But given the darkness and bluster, hardly anyone could be persuaded, and only feeble fires glimmered here and there by the woods.

Witek had been pressing Józka from dusk to come with him to the midsummer revelries, but she just replied dolefully:

‘I’m not going. What does fun matter to me, what’s anything to me now ...’

‘We’ll just light the fire, jump over and run back,’ he begged earnestly.

‘You stay home or I’ll tell Hanka!’ she threatened.

But he ran off and didn’t return until after supper, hungry and smeared with mud like some ungodly creature, since the rain had not stopped for a moment and fell all night. It did not cease until broad daylight the following morning when people were already heading for the funeral service.

Yet the sun did not show itself; the world had sunk into a dust-grey mist in which the fields and orchards seemed still more intensely green and the waters streamed like silvery threads. The air was bracing, cool and fragrant, the raindrops dripping copiously at the slightest breeze, while the birds screeched like crazy things, the dogs bayed merrily, chasing each other along the road together with the children, and every voice carried clearly and joyfully overhead. Even the earth, drunk with rain and swollen with vigour, seemed to stir with irrepressible growth.

Meanwhile, in church, the priest was saying the votive funeral Mass, and together with the parish priest from Slupsk and the organist, who sat opposite each other on the benches before the great altar, they began to drone the Latin hymns.

Boryna lay high on a catafalque, surrounded by a white forest of burning lights. The whole village knelt round him meekly, deep in prayer, absorbed in listening to those long, lamenting hymns that surged at times with such terrible wailing that their hair stood on end and hearts were wrung with pity. They would plunge at other times into a poignant sorrowful moaning, making souls faint with fear and tears stream; or they would rise, ethereal and heavenly, like angelic voices of eternal happiness, so that people heaved deep sighs, wiping their eyes, and time and again someone would burst out in heartfelt weeping.

This went on a good hour, and when they’d finished, making a din as they got up from their knees, Ambrozy began taking the candles from the catafalque and handing them out to the people. The priest went on singing by the coffin, swinging a burning censer over it until the air was blue with smoke. He sprinkled it with holy water, droned a hymn and set off for the door, following the cross as it was borne ahead.

And the church suddenly shook with crying, weeping and sobbing, for the first farmers were lifting the coffin now and carrying it to the cart, its wicker bed strewn with straw, into which Jagustynka pushed a loaf of bread wrapped in clean linen, hidden so that the priest wouldn’t see. Holding the reins tightly, Pietrek whisked his whip and looked round impatiently at the priests.

The bells tolled mournfully. They brought out a black banner, the tapers flaring, Stacho lifted the cross and the priests sang out:

‘*Miserere mei, Deus.*’⁶

And above them, with awe and infinite sadness, sobbed the terrible chant, the chant of death, as they set off slowly along the poplar road to the graveyard.

The black banner with its skeleton was borne ahead, flapping in the wind like a ghastly bird. Behind it glittered the silver cross and a long avenue of candle-bearers, and then came the priests in their black copes.

The cart rode along the middle, the coffin set high on the straw, so that everyone held it constantly in view. Immediately behind trailed the family, keening and moaning, and beside them, and wherever they could squeeze, thronged the whole village, in silence and with great sorrow.

Even the sick and the lame had come from their cottages.

The grey misty sky hung low, as though resting on those great poplars leaning over the road. Everything stood motionless, inclined as though listening hard to the hymns of lament, and when the wind blew and agitated the fields and trees, the raindrops scattered like quiet mournful tears and the heavy ears of the fluttering wheat swayed slowly, bending ever lower as though falling in a final humble bow to the feet of the dead farmer.

The priests' hymn dissolved into the air and a sombre silence fell upon all souls. Only the bells went on wailing, pealing dolefully, their voices rising into the clouded sky, towards the forest and misty distances. The larks sang above the fields, the cart creaked, the banners flapped, mud splashed underfoot, and that painful, abandoned weeping went on without pause.

'*Miserere mei, Deus*,' the parish priest intoned once more. The Stupsk priest echoed him, together with the organist and the blacksmith, who held an umbrella above the priests as it began to drizzle again.

And so mournful and plaintive was their singing that tears flowed, hearts froze. Terrified, lost and helpless, people broke down, and looking up at the cloudy sky, they begged for mercy. Faces grew pale, souls began to shudder in torment and a cold shivering seized them, so that their sighs grew deeper all the time. Some wiped away tears and whispered prayers with livid lips, beating their breasts and confessing remorsefully, while a heavy hopeless sadness and boundless grief oppressed them all, wreathing them in painful ruminations, like stinging smoke, and lamentations thick with dread.

Jesus, have mercy on us sinners! Jesus!

O human fate, O fate unyielding!

What use these wearisome labours? What use this human life that melts without trace, like the snows, so that your own born children do not remember it?

Nothing but grief, tears, suffering ...

And what of happiness, kindness and hope?

No more than smoke, dust, illusion, nothingness ...

And what of you, human creature, who preens and puffs and holds yourself haughtily above all creation?

You are no more than the wind: who knows whence it comes, or why it blows, or whither it vanishes ...

And you think yourself lord of creation?

Should someone grant you paradise itself – still you must relinquish it.

Should someone grant you power without limit – death will tear it from you.

Should someone grant you the greatest of minds – you will turn to dust even so.

And you will not overcome fate, miserable wretch, you will not conquer death, no ...

For you are defenceless, weak and frail as the tiniest of leaves tossed about the world on the wind.

You, human creature, are held in the talons of death like a little bird plucked from the nest, that chirps joyfully, flutters, sings a little and has no idea that soon a treacherous hand will grip its throat and snatch its dear life away.

Why must you drag about a mortal body, O soul – why?

So ran people's thoughts as they ruminated and pondered. Looking sadly at the green fields, they cast yearning eyes over the world and sighed heavily at those untold troubles, until faces grew stony and souls quaked.

But they also knew that the only refuge for humankind was to place itself at the mercy of the Lord, and the only escape for the soul was in his holy compassion.

'*Secundum magnam misericordiam tuam ...*'⁷

As the weighty Latin words fell like lumps of frozen earth, they bowed their heads passively, as though submitting to the implacable scythe of death, yet they walked on undaunted. They walked on, unyielding and resigned, grey and tough as the boulders along the baulks, ready for everything and unafraid, alike at once to the lush fallows and the flowering field, and akin to the trees in strength and frailty – the trees that lightning could strike at any moment and offer into the hands of death, and still they reached proudly for the sun and sang a deep and joyful song of life ...

They walked through the whole village, crowding and jostling, but each so deep in their own individual woes, they might be walking in an empty land, utterly alone. Each gazed unseeing as if through eyes glazed with the tears of their fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers, carried before them to the graveyard and visible now between the poplars' thick trunks ...

The bells went on tolling and the gloomy hymn boomed even more dolefully. Springing from amid the wheat, among crosses and tombs and clumps of trees, the graveyard was close now, and seemed to be opening like a terrible, bottomless pit into which the whole world was slowly but inexorably flowing. In that rainy air, with the bells seeming to ring from every side, the glowing lights, fluttering black banners and the stream of singing, many now imagined coffins emerging from every cottage and funeral processions moving along every lane. Everyone wept over someone, lamenting and sobbing fit to engulf heaven and earth entirely in their sorrowful wailing, and flood it with the murmur of ceaseless tears, bitter as wormwood ...

The column had turned on to the road by the graveyard when the squire caught up with them. He climbed down from his carriage and walked alongside the coffin amid the great crush, since the path was narrow and thickly edged with birches and wheat on either side.

And when the priests had finished singing, Dominikowa, holding on to Jagna, hunched and half blind, launched into 'He who dwells in the shelter ...'⁸

Aye, they joined in eagerly and fervently, as though clinging with their frightened souls to the heartfelt hymn. And singing away now, full of renewed confidence, they entered the graveyard.

The first farmers hoisted the coffin, with even the squire helping. They carried it along the yellow paths in the grass, between crosses and flower-covered tombs, to beyond the chapel, where a freshly dug grave waited in thickets of hazel and lilac.

Terrible cries and weeping rent the air.

Holding banners and candles, folk surrounded the deep pit and, huddled and pressed together, gazed fearfully into that empty hole in the yellowish earth ...

And when they'd sung a little more, the priest, standing on a mound of sand, turned to face them and thundered:

'Christian folk! Good people!'

It suddenly grew quiet. All except for the bells, which kept tolling mournfully in the distance, while Józka, having flung her arms about her father's coffin, wailed bitterly, ignoring everything around her.

The parish priest, meanwhile, took a pinch a snuff, sneezed twice and, casting about with tear-filled eyes, said in a sonorous voice:

'Brothers, whom are we burying today, whom? "Maciej Boryna" you say.

'But I say to you that you are burying also the first among farmers, and an honest man, and a true Catholic ... Many years I knew him and I bear witness that he lived a model life. He praised God, confessed and took communion, and helped the poor. Helped them, I tell you!' he repeated, wheezing heavily.

Sobs and whimpers broke out all around and sighs heaved more deeply. Taking a breath, he continued, more pathetically now:

'And he died, poor wretch, he died! Death picked him out, as the wolf picks out the fattest ram in broad daylight, in full view, and no one stops him.

'As a thunderbolt strikes a lofty tree, so that it falls and splits, so did he fall before death's grim scythe.

'But he is not completely dead! So says Holy Scripture. For lo, he stands as a traveller before the gates of paradise, knocks and whimpers piteously, until St Peter asks:

"Who is this and what do you want?"

"Boryna from Lipce, I am, and I ask for the Lord's mercy ..."

"Have your brothers so irked you that you've cast life off already, eh?"

"I'll tell you everything," says Maciej. "Only open the gates, St Peter, so that the Lord's mercy can warm me a little, for I'm frozen as ice in this earthly exile."

'St Peter opens the gates a little, though still doesn't let him in, and he says:

"Don't you lie, now – you'll not fool anyone here. Speak boldly, soul: why have you fled the earth?"

'And Maciej plunges to his knees, for he'd heard the angels singing and the bells as though at the Elevation, and he replies through his tears:

"I'll tell the truth as at confession: I could stand it no longer on the earth, for people there set upon each other like wolves, and there's naught but feuds and quarrels and offence to God ... They're not people, Holy Peter, nor any of God's creatures at all, but only maddened dogs and stinking hogs. And so ill is it in the world that it can scarce all be told ...

"All obedience has vanished, all honesty, all compassion has vanished. Brother turns on brother, children on fathers, wives on husbands, the servant on his master ... They respect nothing – neither age, nor office, nor even the priest ... The Evil One reigns over hearts, and under his direction there is debauchery and drunkenness, and malice flourishes. Everywhere rogue rides upon rogue and another rogue drives 'em ... Everywhere there's only cunning, deceit, cruel despotism and thievery, so hold on tight to what you have or they'll tear it from you. Be it the very best meadow, they will overgraze and ruin it. Be it but a strip of land, they'll plough over it for their own. If but a chicken slips out of your yard, they'll pounce on it like wolves. Don't you forget a single piece of iron nor a halter, for they'll not overlook it, be it even the priest's, and steal it. They do nothing but drink vodka, wallow in debauchery and completely neglect God's service. Those heathen Christ-slayers, the Jews, are a hundred times more honest and God-fearing."

"And it's in the Lipce parish this is going on?" St Peter interrupted him.

"It's no better in other places, but Lipce is the worst."

'And St Peter began to clasp his hands and glower and roll his eyes, and shaking his fist at the earth, he said:

"So that's how it is, you Lipce folk! That's how things are! Why, you loathsome robbers, pagans worse than Germans! Fine fields you have, and fertile earth, and pasture, and meadows, and a chunk of forest each, and this is how you disport yourselves! ... Getting fat on too much bread, you rogues, you! I'll tell the Lord Jesus this, I will, and he'll soon tighten the reins ..."

'Maciej began to defend his own, but St Peter was angered all the more and he stamped his foot and shouted:

"Don't you defend such prodigals! I'll say only this to you: let those Judases make amends in three weeks and do penance, and if they don't listen, I'll crush them with such hunger, conflagration and disease, those rogues will never forget it!"

The priest spoke firmly, straight to their hearts, and admonished and threatened such divine anger and so shook his fists that sobs spread all around, folk cried and beat their breasts, full of repentance ...

Gasping and recovering his breath a little, the priest again began to speak of the dead man, how he had fallen on behalf of them all ... And he called them to accord. He called them to justice. He called them to restrain themselves in sin, for there was no knowing for whom the final hour would sound next and who would come to stand before the terrible judgement of the Lord ...

Even the squire himself raised a fist to wipe away a tear.

The priests soon finished their business, however, and went off with the squire. When the coffin had been lowered and they began to sprinkle the sand so that it thumped on to the lid below, then, my Jesus, what a cry erupted, what shouts, what laments, fit to break the hardest of hearts!

Józka wailed, Magda wailed, Hanka wailed and all the cousins, both close and distant, wept, kin and total strangers, and Jagusia perhaps most bitterly of all, for something had pierced her so deeply in her breast that she was fair beside herself.

'Ha, she's whining now, but what about the merry dance she led him before!' someone muttered to one side, while Płoszkowa added, wiping her eyes: 'She's crying herself some mercy, so they don't throw her out the house.'

'Does she think anyone's stupid enough to fall for it?' the organist's wife said loudly.

But Jagna was oblivious to the whole blessed world. Wracked by such miserable sobs, she fell upon the sand, as though those fine heavy streams of earth were pouring over her, as though the gloomy voices of the bells were booming over her, crying over her ...

And the bells kept ringing as though complaining to the heavens, while beside the fresh grave all those cries, those sobs and laments complained, too, of relentless fate and endless human injustice.

Soon people began to disperse slowly. One or two still knelt here and there. Some said a prayer for the dead and others wandered among the tombs and pondered sadly. Others, meanwhile, headed reluctantly for their homes, looking round expectantly, for Hanka and the blacksmith were inviting folk for the wake that was customary after a burial.

When they'd patted down the grave and fixed a black cross into the ground at its head, those that remained drew the poor wretches among them and set off in a sizeable group, chatting quietly, commiserating together and crying a little ...

In Boryna's chamber, everything was already neatly arranged. Tables stretched along the walls lined with long benches, so that as soon as all the men were seated, bread and vodka were served.

They drank with dignity, quietly and gravely, had a bite, and the organist began to read from the prayer book. Then they sang the litany for the dead, making the responses gladly and fervently, breaking off only when the blacksmith passed the bottle around again and Jagustynka served more bread.

The women gathered on the other side of the house, at Hanka's. They drank tea, ate sweet cake and under the direction of the organist's wife sang so plaintively and poignantly that the chickens began to cluck in the orchard. And so, remembering the departed kindly, folk ate and drank and wept and sang pious hymns for his soul, as was fitting at such a time and for such a farmer ...

It was a lavish wake. Hanka urged them to help themselves, begrudging neither food nor drink. At noon, when several people had begun to look around for their hats, they served noodles and milk, and then roast meat and cabbage-with-peas, liberally garnished.

'Better than some folk's weddings!' whispered Bolesławowa.

'Well, didn't the departed leave plenty behind, eh?'

'Indeed, they've got more than enough to cheer them, they have.'

'They must have snapped up plenty of ready cash too ...'

'Blacksmith's carping that there was a goodly amount, but it's vanished.'

'He gripes, but he's likely got it well hidden somewhere.'

The women chatted quietly among themselves, scraping their bowls clean and with an eye on Hanka, who was constantly vigilant in case anyone should lack anything. On the men's side, the organist, not a little drunk now, hoisted himself up at the table and, glass in hand, began singing the dead man's praises in such lofty terms and with Latin citations that, though they understood but little, they all felt like crying as at a sermon.

The hum of talk grew and faces reddened, and since the bottle circled often and the glasses were clinking away, many a guest groped for his glass with one hand and embraced his fellow's neck with the other, mumbling in a befuddled way. Someone droned some dirge and attempted to pray for the dead man, but no one echoed him or listened now, as all were talking with their favoured companions, vowing eternal friendship and raising toasts again and again, while those keen on the drink slipped out furtively and made for the inn. Ambrozy alone was quite unlike himself today. Aye, he drank as much as the rest, and maybe more, since he himself adjured them for the vodka, but he just sat in a corner, greatly morose, wiping his eyes constantly and sighing.

Someone prodded him, keen to draw out a droll tale or two.

'Leave me be, I'm in too sad a way for it!' he retorted. 'I'll die soon, die ... Only the dogs'll howl for me and a woman'll ring a broken pot,' he muttered tearfully. 'Why, I was at Maciej's christening! ... I danced at his wedding! ... I buried his father! I remember it well! My Jesus, so many folk's graves I've heaped with earth, rung that many bells ... And now my time is come!'

He got up suddenly and went out quickly to the orchard. Witek later recounted how the old man had sat crying behind the cottage until late ...

Aye, no one troubled themselves over him; each had woes aplenty of his own, and besides the priest came at dusk, most unexpectedly, together with the squire. He comforted the poor bereaved kindly, petted the children, chatted with the housewives and even willingly drank the tea that Józka served him, while the squire, after conversing of this and that with one or other of the guests, took a glass from the blacksmith and drank to all as he said to Hanka:

'If anyone has cause to mourn for Maciej, then it is surely I, for were he living now, I would willingly seek peace with the village. Perhaps even give what you first wanted!' He raised his voice, casting his eyes about. 'But is there anyone I can discuss terms with now? I don't wish to parley with the commissioner and in the village there is no one to step up!'

They listened attentively, weighing his every word.

He said this and that and talked some more, but he might as well have addressed the wall, for not a single tongue did he entice nor did anyone even open his mouth, but they just nodded, scratching their heads, and glancing at each other meaningfully. Seeing that he would not break through this cautious watchfulness, he summoned the priest and they left, a whole crowd seeing them off as far as the farmyard.

After this departure, they began to wonder and puzzle greatly.

'Well, well, a squire at a peasant's funeral.'

'He needs us, so he's buttering us up,' said Płoszka.

'And why wouldn't he come out o' the goodness of his heart, eh?' Kłqb defended him.

'You've gathered years aplenty but have grown no wiser. When did the squire ever come to the village in friendship, when?'

'There must be something in it, since he's seeking accord!'

'He needs it more than we do, that's what.'

'And we can wait, we can!' called a drunken Sikora.

'You can, but others can't!' yelled Grzela, the Voyt's brother.

They began quarrelling and holding forth, for one had to say his piece and the next his, with a third opposing them both, while others muttered:

'Let him hand over the woods and land, and then there'll be accord.'

'We don't need accord. When the distributions⁹ come, it'll all be ours anyway. Let the son-of-a-bitch pack his bags and begone for the wrong he's done us.'

'The Jews are squeezing him, so he's whining for the peasants' help.'

'And all he knew before was how to shout: "Out of the way, lout, or you'll feel my whip!"'

'I'm telling you, don't go believing the squire, for every one of 'em is ready to betray the peasant,' called someone even more drunkenly.

'Listen now, farmers!' the blacksmith shouted suddenly. 'I'll give you a word of advice: if the squire wants accord, then you should accept and take what you can and not wait for pears to grow on a willow.'

Grzela, the Voyt's brother, rose at that and cried:

'Gospel truth! Let's go to the inn, we can talk there.'

'And I'll stand you all a drink,' the blacksmith added willingly.

They soon piled out into the farmyard. Dusk was deepening a little, the cattle were returning from the pastures, and from all over the village came sounds of lowing and honking, the shrill tunes of a pipe, and childish songs and shouts.

And despite the women's nagging and opposition, the men set off for the inn in a body. Only Sikora dallied a little, catching hold of a fence, where he lingered awhile, clearing his throat.

They advanced so noisily, bursting into song for a little relief, or giving vehement shouts, that they could be heard for some time.

At the Borynas', meanwhile, once they'd tidied up after the guests and a dark evening had fallen, it grew quiet, strangely empty and sad.

Jagusia knocked about her chamber like a bird in a cage and kept darting to Hanka's side, but seeing them all so gloomy and troubled, she ran off without a word.

Aye, the cottage was like a tomb, and when they'd done the farm chores and eaten supper, though almost falling asleep, no one was in a hurry to leave the room. They sat by the fireplace, gazing into the flames and fearfully listening for every rustle.

It was a quiet evening, with only an occasional gust of wind sweeping through the trees. Sometimes the fences creaked, windowpanes rattled or Lapa would growl and bristle menacingly, followed by long, sepulchral silences that went on for ever.

Meanwhile, they just sat there, more and more shaken, and so afraid that, again and again, someone would cross themselves and, with trembling lips, begin a prayer. It seemed to everyone that something was moving around somewhere – walking overhead and making the beams shake, listening at the door, looking in at the window or rubbing against the walls. It sounded as though someone had lifted the latch and was now walking around the whole cottage with a heavy tread.

They blanched as they listened, holding their breath, almost beside themselves.

Suddenly the horse neighed in the stable, Łapa barked furiously and hurled himself at the door and Józka, unable to restrain herself, shouted, 'Father! God's sake, Father!' and burst out crying, terrified.

At this, Jagustynka snapped her fingers three times and said gravely:

'Stop your bleating: you're keeping the soul from leaving in peace. Weeping only binds it to the earth. Open the door – let the wanderer fly away to Jesus' fields ... Let it depart and be at peace.'¹⁰

They opened the door. The chamber grew quiet and seemed to ebb somehow. No one moved; only their feverish eyes darted about. Łapa sniffed the corners of the room, whining a little and wagging his tail as though fawning over someone, so that everyone was quite certain now that the soul of the dead man was moving somewhere among them.

Then Hanka began to sing in a trembling, strangled voice 'All Our Daily Cares'.

And they all repeated it fervently and with immeasurable relief.

CHAPTER 2

It was the most beautiful, truly summer day.

It must have been ten in the morning, for the sun was poised halfway between dawn and midday and beating down more intensely as it rose, when every single Lipce bell rang out with all its might.

The one they called Pieter boomed loudest of all, singing out full-throatedly, like a slightly drunken peasant swaying from side to side along the road and assailing the whole world with his tales of mirth ...

Meanwhile the second, a tad smaller, the one Ambrozzy declared had been christened Paweł,¹ was clamouring no less loudly and joined in even more eagerly, pealing long and loftily in pure high-pitched tones as though carried away, like some lass when love overwhelms her, or a spring day when it flies into the field, pushing its way through the wheat and singing with all its heart to the winds, the fields, the bright sky and its own festive soul.

As for the third – the Angelus bell – it twittered like a bird, trying to outdo the others, but in vain, though it jangled in the quick choppy voice of a childish squabble. They were ringing now like a proper band with a bass booming, fiddles wailing and the tabour's cymbals jingling merrily – all clanging away, loud and sonorous.

For it was St Peter and St Paul's.² always a solemn feast in Lipce, and this the people's joyful summons to the indulgences.

The weather couldn't have been better, quiet and sunny, promising a true scorcher of a day. The tradesmen had been busy since dawn on the square before the church, putting up all manner of stalls, booths and tables, covered with canvas canopies.

No sooner had the bells begun to chime, no sooner had their exultant voices rung out into the world, than more and more carts began to rumble along the dry roads in clouds of dust. Throngs of folk appeared on foot, so that, as far as the eye could see on every side, roads and paths and baulks were red with women's dresses and fluttering with white capotes. They came trailing in rows like gaggles of geese shimmering in the heat among the green wheat.

The sun was climbing higher and higher, flying like a golden bird across the pure blue sky, growing brighter and hotter. The air was already trembling over the meadows; sometimes a pleasant chill still blew from the fields and rocked the whitening rye, while the oats rustled faintly, the ears of young wheat quivered and the blossoming, blue-tinged flax flowed in a stream like water, but everything was slowly plunging now into the quiet blistering heat of the sun.

Hej! It was a joyful day, truly a feast! The bells rang out endlessly, their plangent voices reverberating over the world so loudly that blades of grass swayed and birds took fright, but still those bronze hearts beat constantly and rhythmically, strong and high, lifting their poignant song to the sun and crying:

'Have mercy! Mercy! Mercy!'

'Most Holy Mother! Mother! Mother!'

'To you I cry! And I! And I! And I!'

So they sang wholeheartedly as they proclaimed the solemn feast.

The very air seemed to breathe this holy day of indulgence. It was a holiday in every green-wreathed cottage, in the distances that shimmered like candlelight, in happy voices and in something inexpressible that floated over the fields, making hearts swell with tranquillity and cheer.

Crowds of folk were hurrying and piling in from every side. Clouds of dust rolled ceaselessly along all the roads, while carts clattered, horses neighed and a multitude of voices and loud conversations flew to and fro. Someone would lean occasionally from a cart-basket and shout to the passers-by, or a tardy old beggar would hurry along, singing fitfully. In some carts, prayers were being whispered while folk looked all about with mute amazement at the earth that stood adorned as though for a wedding, all decked out in flowers and greenery and full of birdsong, the rustle of wheat and the humming of bees – so wondrous and boundless, festive and utterly holy, burgeoning with life, it filled the heart to bursting.

The trees along the baulks stood like sentries, gazing at the sun, and along the lowlands, as far as the eye could see, stretched green fields, murmuring like a stormy sea, and like a sea they heaved from side to side, lapping against the lanes and baulks and ditches, which gleamed like flowery ribbons densely entwined with yellow, violet and feathery white. Larkspur in every colour was blossoming already, while the hidden fragrant eyes of flowering bindweed looked out from thickets of rye and cornflowers bloomed on softened patches as thickly as though the sky had lain down there. Whole clumps of vetch were in flower, along with buttercups, dandelions and red teasel, charlock, clover, daisies and wild chamomile, and a thousand others known only to the Lord since they blossom for him alone and with such a fragrance that the fields seemed as hazy as in church when the priest was censing the Sacrament.

Breathing in the scented air with pleasure, people flicked their whips to hurry their horses, as the sun was fiery now and sleep tormenting them, so that several heads were already nodding.

Lipce was soon brimming with folk. They kept arriving, endlessly, and everywhere along the road, around the pond, by the fences, in the farmyards and wherever there was the slightest shade, carts parked and people unharnessed their horses, for the square before the church was now so crowded with carts standing wheel to wheel that you could barely squeeze through. Lipce was virtually sinking under the crush of people, carts and horses.

The din grew louder. Noise and shouts rose above the whole village and folk were humming like a swaying forest. The women stood around the pond, soaking their feet, pulling on their boots and making themselves decent for church. The men bantered in groups, conspiring with their neighbours, while the lasses and lads pushed their way eagerly to the stalls and booths, especially to the barrel organ on which some little creature from overseas, dressed in red with a snout like an old German, made such comical little skips and frolics that they clutched their sides with laughter.

The barrel organ played with a vengeance, striking up a tune that set many a foot tapping, and as if in accompaniment the old beggars sitting in two rows from the vestibule to the square began to drone their songs of entreaty. In the very gates of the graveyard sat the fat blind old man with the dog and he sang most earnestly of all, drawing out the notes the longest.

But as soon as the signal came for High Mass, folk dropped their diversions and surged towards the church in a torrent, filling it so tightly that ribs were cracking, and still more folk kept arriving, squeezing in, and even squabbling, though most had to remain outside, huddling against the walls and trees.

A few priests from other parishes had arrived too and immediately occupied the confessionals under the trees to hear people's confessions, despite the crowds and heat.

The wind had dropped completely and it was unbearably oppressive, like fire beating down straight on to their heads, yet folk crowded patiently by the confessionals and swarmed about the graveyard, seeking in vain a patch of shade or any kind of cover.

The parish priest had just come out to say Mass when Hanka and Józka arrived, but since it was impossible to squeeze even as far as the church doors, they stood in broad sun by the palings, looking about the crowd and greeting friends with a 'Praised be'. The organ rumbled and the High Mass began. Everyone knelt, then seated themselves and began to pray ardently.

It was on the dot of noon and the sun was blazing down directly overhead. Everything seemed to swoon in the heat, so that not a leaf trembled, not a bird flew past, nor any voice carried from the fields. Above, the sky was utterly still, like a white-hot sheet of glass, while the air trembled like boiling water, blinding the eyes. The earth was scorching, the hot walls were scorching, and folk knelt without moving, barely breathing, as though slowly stewing in that scalding stream of sunlight.

All the folk prayed in deep silence, some from books and some with their rosaries, while some praised God with sincere words and heartfelt sighs alone. The solemn music of the organ swelled in rapt veneration, sometimes a voice rose from the altar, the handbells tinkled now and then or the deep voice of the organist resounded, and then long moments of silence stretched as though dumbfounded in the heat and burning incense floated through the open doors of the church, winding in a blue and fragrant mist over the bowed heads of the kneeling people.

The faint thin murmur of prayers crackled in the bleached stillness of the hot afternoon. Colourful scarves, capotes and woollen skirts shimmered in the sunlight, so that the whole graveyard seemed sprinkled with flowers bowing humbly in that holy hour before the Lord, as though he were hidden in the blazing sun and in all the silences of the world ...

Occasionally someone would straighten their back, spreading their hands and sighing deeply, or a child would cry out, or the whinny of a horse was heard from where the carts were parked. Even the beggars were quiet, with a slightly louder Hail Mary or a suppliant whine escaping every so often from someone as they dozed.

And the heat grew stronger, baking so hard that the fields and orchards seemed to be swimming in fire, flickering with white flames. The silence grew sleepier, so that quite a few were snoring soundly now. Several swayed as they knelt, while others went out to refresh themselves and the winch of a well could soon be heard creaking again and again.

Not until the procession – when the church shook with singing and the banners came tumbling out, followed by the priest, escorted only by squires, under a red baldachin, the monstrance in his hands – did the folk rouse themselves and tread behind.

The bells rang and tumultuous singing burst from every throat, soaring, powerful and heartfelt, towards the sun itself. The procession glided slowly around the burning white walls of the church like an overflowing river. The red baldachin floated in front, all wreathed in smoky incense through which the golden monstrance flashed from time to time. Rows of candles flickered, the unfurled banners fluttered like birds above the thronging heads and the holy pictures decked in tulle and ribbons swayed as the bells pealed joyfully and the organ thundered. Folk sang with elation and every heart and yearning soul rose as though to the very heavens, to that most blessed sun.

After the procession, when the service resumed and the powerful voice of the organ boomed, the graveyard became as quiet as before, but no one snoozed now. Instead, the whisper of prayers intensified and sighs echoed, while beggars began tapping their bowls and the hum of quiet conversations struck up here and there.

Having emerged from church, the squires were looking in vain for shade and somewhere to sit, until Ambrozzy chased some folk from under a tree. He then fetched stools and they sat conversing together.

The Wola squire was among them, but he could not sit still and paced about the graveyard. Whenever he spied a familiar Lipce villager, he accosted them amiably. On spotting Hanka, he immediately squeezed his way through to her.

'Is your husband back?'

'If only!'

'You went to fetch him, they say?'

'Aye, right after Father's burial, but they said at the offices it would be in a week's time, so Wednesday, it seems.'

'What about the bail – will you pay it?'

'Oh, Rocho's looking after that,' she declared cautiously.

'If you don't have the money, I'll vouch for Antek ...'

'God bless you!' She bowed low to his feet. 'Perhaps Rocho will manage somehow, and if not, some other way'll have to be found.'

'Remember: I'll vouch for him, if need be.'

He went over to Jagusia, who was sitting by the wall with her mother and deep in prayer, but, unable to find a fitting word, he just smiled at her before turning back to his companions.

Hanka's eyes flew after him, keenly examining the women in his party – so dressed up it was a wonder, with such pale little faces and so pinched at the waist, Jesus! And they gave off a fragrance like the censer. They were each cooling themselves with something that looked like a turkey tail spread out. A few young squires were staring at them and laughing fit to annoy the folk nearby.

Suddenly, at the end of the village, most likely by the bridge at the mill, there came a sharp rattle of cartwheels and clouds of dust billowed under the trees.

'Someone's late,' Pietrek whispered to Hanka.

'Scum'll arrive in time to put the candles out,' someone added.

Others were hanging over the graveyard wall and peering curiously down the lanes around the pond.

And very soon, amid noisy clamour and loud barking, a whole row of great britchkas hove into view, each covered with a white canvas bonnet.

'It's the Germans! Germans from Podlesie!' someone cried out.

And in truth it was.

They advanced in a dozen or so britchkas harnessed to stout horses. All their household wares could be seen beneath the canvas, along with women and children, while the ruddy, well-fed men walked beside them, pipes between their teeth. Enormous dogs ran alongside, baring their fangs occasionally and barking at the Lipce dogs, who snapped at them fiercely again and again.

Folk rushed forwards to take a look and several climbed over the railing and ran to see up close.

The Germans rode past at walking pace, barely squeezing through the crush of carts and horses, but not a single one doffed his cap at the church or greeted anyone. They just stared at the Lipce folk, bold as ruffians, their eyes flashing and their beards trembling as though in anger.

'Knickerbocker scum!'

'Mare's spawn!'

'Swine's arse!'

'Sons of curs!'

The insults flew like stones.

'Hey there, Germans! Who won, then?' Mateusz shouted after them.

'Who beat who?'

'Scared of peasants' fists, eh?'

'Wait on, it's a holiday! Let's have some fun at the inn!'

The Germans did not reply but hurried on, lashing their horses.

'Slow down, knickerbockers, or you'll lose yer trousers.'

Some boy lobbed a stone at them, and others began to snatch up bricks to follow his example, but they were stopped in time.

'Give over, lads. Let those pests leave.'

'Plague take you, heretic dogs.'

Raising her fist, a Lipce woman shouted:

'May every last one of you perish like mad dogs ...'

The Germans passed through at last, disappearing along the poplar road, so that only the fading creak of carts and the sound of barking emerged from the dust and shadows.

Then so overjoyed were the Lipce folk that no one could set their mind to their prayers and they crowded about the squire even more. Much gratified, he chatted merrily, sharing his snuff, and finally declared unctuously:

'Well, you smoked them out – the whole swarm has left.'

'Our sheepskins stank 'em out,' someone said, laughing, and Grzela, the Voyt's brother, remarked with feigned concern: 'Too delicate a nation for peasant neighbours. You need barely waylay one and down he goes, straight off ...'

'Did someone fight with them?' the squire asked, curious.

'Nay, weren't hardly a fight. Mateusz gave one a tap when he didn't return his "Praised be". The fellow were all bloody in an instant and a wonder he didn't give up the ghost.'

'A downright soft lot. The men look big as oaks to the eye, but bring down your fist and it's like landing on a quilt,' Mateusz added quietly.

'They'd no luck in Podlesie. Seems their cows failed.'

'True, they weren't leading a single one.'

'Kobus could tell you!' one of the boys piped up, but Kłab shouted sharply:

'You're daft as a brush! They died of the pox, obviously ...'

They all but doubled up with suppressed mirth, but no one said a word except for the blacksmith, who remarked, moving closer:

'If the Germans have taken off, then it's thanks to the squire.'

'For I prefer to sell to my own, even at half the price,' the latter assured them eagerly, explaining how he and his fathers and grandfathers had always sided with the peasants, how they'd always worked together ...

At which Sikora gave a laugh and said quietly:

'Just as the old squire ordered should be written with a whip across my shoulders. Written that well, I mark it still.'

But the squire seemed not to hear, saying what trouble he'd gone to, indeed, to be rid of the Germans. Aye, they heard him out, nodding politely while thinking their own thoughts of these kindnesses shown to the peasant community.

'Fine benefactors – they'll steal the yolk without breaking the shell!' Sikora muttered, but Kłab gave him a push to stop.

And so they stood, paying court to each other, when some stripling priest in a white cope and a plate in his hand began to push his way towards them.

'Well I ... looks like the organist's Jasio!' someone cried.

Aye, so it was, but dressed up as a priest and collecting alms for the church. He greeted and saluted everyone, drumming up donations. They knew him after all and there was no way to wriggle out of making an offering, so everyone unknotted some ten groszy from their pouches and soon zlotys were jingling against his bronze coins; the squire threw in a rouble and the ladies showered him with silver. Perspiring and flushed with tiredness but greatly delighted, Jasio collected indefatigably around the whole graveyard, not overlooking anyone and not begrudging anyone a good word. Bumping into Hanka, he greeted her so kindly that she put in a whole forty groszy; and when he stopped before Jagusia and jiggled his tray, she raised her eyes as though numb with astonishment. He too was a little confused, muttered something or other and went on quickly.

She even forgot to make an offering and simply gazed and gazed after him, for he seemed to her just like one of the painted saints in the side altar, so young and slender and beautiful. He'd enchanted her with that look of his, it seemed, for though she rubbed her eyes and crossed herself again, it didn't help.

'Just an organist's kid, and got up so grand.'

'His mother's puffed up as a turkey.'

'He's been at that there priests' school since Easter.'

'Parish priest had him sent for, to help with the indulgences.'

'His old man's a skinflint and rips off the people, but he don't begrudge his son.'

'Aye, for it's an honour isn't it, to have him be a priest?'

'And profitable too.'

So went the whispers, but Jaguś heard nothing, her eyes following Jasio wherever he went.

The High Mass had just ended. The priest was still announcing notices and reminders from the pulpit, but people were already slowly streaming out. Raising their whining voices, the beggars began to drone their hymn of supplication.

Hanka too was making for the door, when Balcerkówna squeezed next to her with a fine little snippet of news. 'Did you know,' she rattled off breathlessly, 'the banns have been read for Dominikowa's Szymek and Nastusia.'

‘Well, well – what’ll Dominikowa have to say!’

‘She’ll be picking a fight with her son, that’s what.’

‘It won’t help. It’s Szymek’s right and he’s plenty old enough.’

‘She’ll make hell on earth, she will, hell on earth,’ Jagustynka declared.

‘Are there not quarrels enough, offences enough against God!’ Hanka said with a sigh.

‘Did you hear about the Voyt?’ Płoszkowa accosted her, bearing down alongside with her portly belly and fat red face.

‘I’ve had enough on my plate with the burial and that many new troubles, I’ve no idea what the carry-on is in the village.’

‘The gendarme told my man there’s a big sum missing from the village funds. The Voyt’s running about and whining for loans, to collect sommat at least, with an investigation in the offing any day ...’

‘Father always said it would end this way.’

‘He swaggered about, preening himself, ruling the roost. Now he can pay for his lording!’

‘Can they take his farm away?’

‘They can, and if it’s not enough, he can sit in the slammer for the rest,’ Jagustynka said. ‘He lived it up, the ruffian, now he can repent.’

‘I thought it strange he didn’t show up even at the burial.’

‘What’s Boryna to him, when he’s friendly with the widow.’

They fell silent, for just then Jaguś appeared, leading her mother. The old woman was hunched and her eyes still bound, but Jagustynka wasn’t going to let the chance slip.

‘When’s Szymek’s wedding? No one expected it from the pulpit today! Aye, it’s hard to forbid the boy when he’s tired of lasses’ work. Nastusia can help him out now ...’ she needled with a laugh.

Dominikowa suddenly drew herself up and said grimly:

‘Lead on, Jaguś, lead on quick, before that bitch bites me.’ And she hurried away as though fleeing.

‘Supposed to be blind, but she saw well enough ...’ Płoszkowa laughed quietly.

‘Not too blind to get a grip on Szymek’s hair,’ said Jagustynka.

‘God prevent her from her getting her hands on anyone else’s ...’

Jagustynka did not reply. A crush had built up at the gates so that Hanka was left behind, but she was even glad of it, since she was sick of all that unkind pecking. She began giving the beggars two groszy each, careful not to let a single one go without. Pressing a whole ten groszy on the old blind man with the dog, she said:

‘Come to us for dinner, Granddad! To the Borynas!’

The beggar raised his head and rolled his blind eyes.

‘Antek’s wife, I’m thinking! God bless! I’ll hurry along, aye, I will.’

It was a little freer beyond the gates, but there were more beggars there, in two rows, creating a wide thoroughfare and crying out in all manner of different ways. At the very end knelt some young man with a green peaked cap over his eyes, playing the fiddle and singing songs about kings and times gone by. A whole group stood about him and coins rained into his hat.

Pausing by the graveyard to look about for Józka, Hanka most unexpectedly laid eyes upon her father.

He was sitting in the row of beggars, stretching out his hands to the passers-by and moaning for alms.

It was as though she’d been stabbed with a knife. Thinking at first she’d imagined it, she rubbed her eyes more than once; but it was him, really him! ... Her father among the beggars! Jesus! It was a wonder she didn’t burn up with shame.

Pulling her scarf further over her brow, she picked her way through to him behind the carts by which he was sitting. ‘What do you think you’re doing, eh?’ she hissed, squatting behind him, to hide from people’s eyes.

‘Hanus ... well, I ... well ...’

‘You come home right now! Jesus, the shame of it! Come on!’

‘I’m not coming ... I made up my mind long ago ... I’m not burdening you when there’s good people that can help ... I’ll be off into the world like the rest ... I’ll see holy places ... learn new things ... I’ll even bring plenty o’ groszy back to you ... Here’s a zloty, buy something fine for Pietruś ... go on ...’

She gripped him firmly by the collar and almost dragged him between the carts.

‘Home, right now. Have you no shame?’

‘Let go or I’ll get angry!’

‘You drop those little pouches, quick, before anyone sees.’

‘I’ll do as I please, aye ... why should I be ashamed ... if hunger’s your brother, a pouch is your mother.’ He broke away suddenly, slipped between the carts and horses, and disappeared.

There was no way to hunt and find him in the crowd that had formed on the square before the church.

The sun was scorching fit to make your skin peel and people’s lungs were clogged with dust, but although folk were tired and it was hot as blazes, they jostled together in a happy throng that seethed like a pot on the boil.

The barrel organ played loud enough for the whole village to hear. The beggars whined to their own tune, the children blew clay whistles and the dogs barked, while the horses nibbled each other and grunted, as the flies were more tiresome than usual that day. Everyone was talking or shouting to their friends as they mingled and pushed their way to the stalls, where the crowd swarmed like a hive and girls’ squeals rose above the din.

The booths with pious trinkets fair rocked under the pressure of women. No smaller was the crowd where they were selling rings of sausage, hanging like thick halters from poles, while others were selling bread and sweet rolls. Some Jew was exhorting folk to buy his sweets, while elsewhere ribbons fluttered from under the canvas roofs and strings of beads of every kind. Everywhere there was an immeasurable crush, hubbub and shouting as though in a temple.³ A good few prayers went by before folk calmed down somewhat and grew quieter. Some wandered off to the inn, some set off home, and others, wearied by the heat and fatigue, lay down in the shade of the carts, by the pond or in the orchards and farmsteads, to have a bite to eat and rest.

It was almost impossible to breathe in the baking heat of the afternoon, which so afflicted them that soon they had no desire to talk or even to move, like trees wilting in the heat. Since everyone had sat down to their bowls, it had now grown almost completely quiet, except for children raising a racket here and there, or horses pawing the ground by the carts.

Meanwhile, at the presbytery the parish priest was entertaining the priests and squires to dinner. People’s heads could be seen through the open windows, the hum of conversation, clinking and laughter could be heard, and the smell of all the dainties was enough to make anyone’s mouth water.

Dressed in his finest, with his medals on his breast, Ambrozy kept bustling about the hallway and running on to the porch with the cry:

‘You’re not coming in, scum! Off with you, or you’ll feel my stick so’s you remember!’

But unable to see off all the degenerates gathering like sparrows about the palings, the bolder among them even advancing as far as the windows, all he could do was to curse and threaten them with a smack from the priest’s pipe.

Hanka arrived at this point and stopped by the gate.

‘Are you looking for someone?’ he asked, limping towards her.

‘Have you seen my father anywhere?’

‘Bylica? It’s that hot, God help us, that he’s surely sleeping somewhere in the shade ... Hey! Damn numskull!’ he yelled again and chased after some boy.

Hanka, greatly agitated, went straight home and told the whole story to her sister, who had come for dinner. But Weronka only shrugged.

‘The crown won’t fall from his head for sitting amid the beggars, and easier on us, if only a bit. Plenty better off than him have finished at the church gates.’

‘Jesus, the shame of it, my born father begging! What’ll Antek say? There’ll be talk, they’ll say we chased him out to beg.’

‘Let ‘em yap all they like. All quick to mouth off, but not so quick to help.’

‘I’ll not allow Father to go begging.’

‘Then move him in with you and feed him, if you’re that high-minded.’

‘I will too! Do you begrudge him a mouthful of food! Aye, now I see you forced it on him yourself.’

‘Is it overflowing at mine, eh? I’m to take it out my children’s mouths and give it him?’

‘He’s earned his keep at yours, do you not think?’

‘I can’t squeeze it out my guts if I’ve not got it.’

‘Well, you’d better, for Father comes first. He’s often complained that you starve him and care better for the pig.’

‘Oh true, aye, I starve my father, and me, I live like the squire’s ladies. I’m that well fed, my skirt’s hanging from my hips and I can hardly shift my pins. We barely get by on credit.’

‘Stop blathering. Anyone’d think it were true.’

‘It is true. If it weren’t for Jankiel, we’d be short even of salt and potatoes. Aye, a full stomach never believes a hungry one!’ She was almost in tears, more and more forlorn, when the blind beggar lumbered into the farmstead, led by his dog.

‘Sit down by the house.’ Hanka turned to him before busying herself with the dinner. He sat down on the earth bench and, laying aside his crutches and letting the little dog run free, he sniffed deeply to check if there was any eating going on already and in what direction.

In fact they’d just sat down to dinner under the tree and Hanka had spooned the food into the bowls, so that the aroma spread far and wide.

‘Groats and pork fat, mighty fine. May it be to your health,’ grunted the beggar, inhaling the delicious smell and licking his lips greedily.

They ate slowly, blowing on each spoonful of the food. Łapa squirmed, whining quietly, and the beggar's dog panted by the wall with his tongue hanging out. The searing heat was terrible. Even the shade did not shield them; it was a wonder everything did not melt. In the hot and sleepy silence, the only sounds were the scraping of spoons or the twittering of a swallow somewhere under the thatch.

'Oh, for a bowl of soured milk to cool down!' The beggar sighed.

'I'll soon fetch one!' Józka assured him.

'Get much out of 'em today?' asked Pietrek, dipping his spoon drowsily.

'Have mercy, Lord, on sinners, and do not hold them to account for the wrongs done to beggars! Much! Whoever sees a beggar looks keenly at the sky or skirts him by a furlong. Or another picks out a grosz and would happily take the change from ten kopecks! You could die of hunger,' said the beggar.

'It were a hard preharvest for everyone this year,' Weronka murmured.

'True, but no one's caught short when it comes to vodka.'

Józka pushed the bowl into the beggar's hands and he began to eat eagerly.

'They were saying at the graveyard,' he piped up again, 'that Lipce is to make peace with the squire today. It's true, is it?'

'If they get what they're owed, then maybe they will,' said Hanka.

'And the Germans have left, did you know?' Witek exclaimed.

'May the pestilence choke 'em!' the beggar cursed, shaking his fist.

'Wronged you too, have they?'

'I stopped by there yesterday evening. They set the dogs on me. Heretic scum, dogspawn. The Lipce villagers have so provoked 'em they've had to run away! I'd skin that kind to the flesh,' he went on, energetically scooping from his bowl. Having finished, he fed his little dog and set about hoisting himself up from the earth bench.

'Harvest-time, so you're keen to get to work,' Pietrek said with a laugh.

'Keen, aye; last year there was six of us altogether at the fair, and today three *mendel*-worth, shrieking fit to make your ears swell.'

'Come for the night,' Józka invited him.

'May Jesus grant you health for remembering a poor waif.'

'A poor waif, the bastard, but he can scarce hoist his fat belly,' Pietrek mocked, watching him totter, stout as a log, down the middle of the road, tapping his stick for obstacles. The house soon emptied. Some made for the shade to nap and were snoring in no time, while the rest went off to the indulgences.

They were ringing for vespers. The sun was now bowing deeply to the west. The heatwave seemed to have eased a little, so though a good number were still resting by the cottages, more and more people were gathering on the square before the church, among the stalls and booths. Józka went off with the other girls to buy holy pictures, but mainly to feast their eyes on ribbons, beads and all the other wonders of the fair.

The barrel organ resumed its playing. The beggars began droning in tandem, clanging their bowls, and the din slowly rose, filling the whole village, so that it seemed to buzz like a hive before swarming.

Now everyone was sated and rested, they gladly met with their fellows to make merry together, some chatting with friends, others staring wide-eyed at everything. Some pressed forward just because others were, some headed for a glass with their friends, while others still made for the church or sat somewhere in the shade, enlarging upon all manner of things, and all were equally elated from the sheer joy of the feast. And no wonder – hadn't everyone prayed and sighed their fill, after all, gazing apleanty at the gold, lights, pictures and other holy things, spilling honest tears, listening to the organ and singing. Hadn't they thoroughly immersed themselves in that feast, cleansing and fortifying the soul, seeing all manner of folk, collecting souvenirs and shedding all their troubles for that one day at least!

It was the custom that be they the wealthiest of farmers or the poorest of folk, hired hands or simple beggars, all enjoyed themselves together, creating such a hubbub and thronging around the stalls that it was hard to squeeze through. Indeed the women chattered the loudest, crushing one another in their eagerness to reach the booths, and at least touch and get a look at all the treasures.

Szymek had just bought Nastusia some amber beads, ribbons and a red scarf. She put them on at once and they walked from stall to stall, arms about each other's waists, utterly delighted and almost drunk with happiness.

Tagging after them, Józka looked at all the things laid out on the tables, but could only haggle, sighing pitifully now and then as she counted her miserable handful of zlotys.

Jagusia was mingling somewhere not far away, pretending she hadn't noticed her brother. She walked about alone, strangely sad and dejected. All these fluttering ribbons did not please her today, nor the playing of the barrel organ, nor the crush and the clamour. She went with the rest, caught up in the crowd, stopped when others stopped, trod where they pushed her, not really knowing why she'd come and where she was going. Mateusz slipped beside her and said meekly:

'Don't chase me away now.'

'Do I ever?'

'Many a time! Did you not curse me, eh?'

'You spoke false, so I had to. Someone ...' She fell silent suddenly.

Jasio was pushing slowly through the crowds in her direction.

'Him at the fair too!' whispered Mateusz, pointing at the little priest, who was laughingly preventing anyone from kissing his hands.

'Like a squire's son! Look how he's got up! I well remember him chasing after cows' tails not too long ago.'

'Oh never, someone like him watching the cows,' she objected, displeased at the thought.

'Like I said, I remember the organist giving him a hiding once because he'd let the cow get into the Pryczeks' oats while he fell asleep under a pear tree ...'

Jaguś left him and began to push her way diffidently towards Jasio. He smiled at her, but finding himself the object of attention, he turned aside, and buying a stack of holy pictures at a stall, began to hand them out to the girls or whoever wanted.

She stood as though rooted to the spot, staring at him with bright eyes and a quiet, sparkling smile, sweet as honey, on her red lips.

'Here, Jaguś, your patron saint,' he said, pushing a picture towards her. Their hands met and darted apart as though scalded. She flinched, not daring to open her mouth. He said something more, but it was as though she'd drowned in his gaze and could barely understand a thing.

The crowd separated them. Having hidden the picture in her bodice, she looked about everywhere at length, but he was nowhere to be seen now. He'd gone to the church, since they'd rung for vespers, yet he stood constantly before her eyes.

'He looks like one o' those little saints!' she whispered unwittingly.

'That's why the lasses are ogling. Idiots. That's not sausage for the dog.'

She looked round quickly. Mateusz was standing beside her. She muttered something and nothing, wanting to shake him off, but he followed hot on her heels. Weighing something up, he asked at last:

'Jaguś, what did your mother say about Szymek's banns?'

'Well, if he wants to marry, let him marry, it's up to him.'

He frowned and asked anxiously:

'And he'll get his morgen, eh?'

'How do I know? She's told me nothing. Let him ask her.'

Szymek and Nastusia joined them and Jędrzych turned up from somewhere to join the group. Szymek began first:

'Jaguś, don't go taking Mother's side when I'm being wronged.'

'When it's your part I'm taking. But you've changed these days, well, well ... Quite a different kettle of fish!' she said in surprise, for he stood before her mightily elegant, tall, clean-shaven, hat attil and his capote white as milk.

'I've climbed free of a child's pen, that's why.'

'And does your freedom suit you?' She laughed at his boldness.

'Let a bird out o' your grasp and you'll soon see! Did you hear the banns?'

'When's the wedding?'

Nastusia nestled against him tenderly, clutching him about the waist.

'In three weeks, before the harvest,' she whispered, blushing.

'And I shall not be asking Mother, even if I have to do it in the inn.'

'And have you got somewhere to take a wife?'

'I have. Why, I'll move into the other side at Mother's. I'm not looking to be someone's hired hand. Let her sign over my portion, and I'll manage!' he boasted impetuously.

'I'll help him, Jaguś. I'll help with everything,' asserted Jędrzych.

'Why, we'll not be sending Nastusia out into the world without a stitch. She'll get a thousand zlotys in cash,' declared Mateusz.

The blacksmith pulled him aside and whispered something before rushing away.

They talked a little longer, particularly Szymek, who expounded on what a farmer he would be, how he would buy more strips, how they'd soon see what he was made of when he got his hands on more land, until Nastusia gazed at him in admiration and Jędrzych affirmed his every word, but Jagusia's eyes and attention wandered. It was all the same to her.

'Come to the inn, Jaguś. There'll be music today,' Mateusz begged.

'The inn's no fun for me now,' she replied sadly.
Looking into her misty eyes, he pulled on his cap and rushed off, elbowing people. He bumped into Tereska by the presbytery.
'Where are you off to?' she asked timidly.
'The inn! Blacksmith's calling a meeting.'

'I could go with you.'

'I'm not chasing you off, there's plenty o' room. Just mark they don't take their tongues to you for always giving me the eye.'

'They're already at me like dogs over a dead sheep.'

'Why give 'em cause then!' He was cross now, and impatient.

'Why? Do you not know?' she challenged him quietly.

He shrugged and went ahead so that she could barely keep up.

'You're bleating like a calf!' he blurted, turning round suddenly.

'No, no ... it's just dust in my eye.'

'When I see tears, it's like someone's stabbed me with a knife!'

Then drawing level with her, he said, strangely kind:

'Here's a few groszy. Buy something at the fair and then come to the inn and we'll dance.'

By the look she gave him, she could have fallen to his feet with gratitude.

'What's the money to me, you ... you're so good ...' she whispered, lighting up.

'And come early in the evening. I won't have much time.'

He looked round at her again from the threshold and smiled before going into the hallway.

It was crowded in the inn already and the heat unbearable. All manner of people were crowded in the main room, drinking and talking, while the younger folk of Lipce had gathered in the snug, together with the blacksmith and Grzela, the Voyt's brother, at their head. Some farmers too had come, including Płoszka, the Soltys, Kłab and Adam, the Borynas' cousin, and even Kobus had squeezed in, though no one had invited him.

When Mateusz entered, Grzela was holding forth heatedly and chalking something on the table. It concerned the agreement with the squire, who had promised that he'd give each peasant four of the Podlesie fields for a morgen of wood, and would release the same amount of land again in instalments. He even wanted to give wood on credit for cottages. Grzela was setting it all out in detail and marking in chalk how they would divide up the land and what would fall to whom.

'Think well on what I'm saying!' he cried. 'The matter's pure as gold.'

'Promises, promises, and the fool rejoices!' muttered Płoszka.

'It's the honest truth and no mere promise. He'll have it all set out at the notary's. Just you get your head round it proper! That much land for the people. And a new farm parcelled out for everyone in Lipce. Think on it well ...'

The blacksmith then repeated what the squire had told him to say.

They listened carefully, but no one replied. They simply looked at the white scribbles on the table and deliberated deeply.

'True, a golden opportunity, but will the commissioner allow it?' The Soltys spoke up first, raking his fingers anxiously through his hair.

'He must! If the community approves, he won't be asking some official for permission! If it's what we want, then he must!' Grzela thundered.

'Must or not, you can stop yelling. Take a look, someone, see if the gendarme's sniffing around by the wall?'

'I just saw him on the corner!' Mateusz replied.

'And when's the squire promising to sign?' someone asked.

'He said it can be tomorrow. If we agree, he'll sign right off, and after, the surveyor will measure what's whose.'

'So we could take that land right after harvest.'

'And work it in the autumn, it looks like.'

'My Jesus, then the work'll really get going, eh!'

They chattered away, merrily, one across the other. They were all overwhelmed with joy. Their eyes flashed with vigour, pride straightened their backs and their hands seemed to stretch out of their own accord to seize that much-desired land.

Some hummed with pleasure and shouted to the Jew for vodka, some prattled nonsense about portions and divisions, and all of them dreamed of new farms, riches and happiness. They prated like drunken men, laughing, beating their fists on the table and stamping their feet with elation.

'What a celebration that'll be for Lipce!'

'*Hej!* The fun and music there'll be!'

'And plenty of weddings at carnival!'

'We'll be short of girls in the village!'

'Then we'll buy in some townies – can we not afford it?'

'Son-of-a-bitch, I'll drive nowt but stallions.'

'Quiet now, you lot!' cried old Płoszka, banging his fist on the table. 'Shouting like Jews on the Sabbath! I just want to say, might there not be some trickery afoot in these promises of the squire's? Do you mark my meaning?'

They fell silent, as though someone had suddenly poured cold water over them. After a pause, the Soltys spoke up:

'I don't understand either. How come he's so generous?'

'Aye, there must be some trickery in it, to give that much land almost for nothing,' took up one of the elders.

But at this Grzela leapt up and shouted:

'And I say that you're stupid sheep and that's the measure of it!'

And again he set about explaining and demonstrating heatedly, until he was as lathered as a horse. The blacksmith prattled away, working on each one separately, but old Płoszka would not let himself be swayed. He just shook his head and laughed so witheringly that Grzela leapt at him with his fists, barely restraining his anger.

'Tell us your view, since ours looks like trickery.'

'I will! I know that dogspawn well, I know him, and I'm saying to you, don't you trust the squire till it's in black and white. They've always fed on our wrongs and they want another bite now!'

'Don't agree, then, if that's how you find it, but don't you hinder others!' Kłab shouted at him.

'You went to the woods against 'im, but now you're taking his side!'

'I did, and if need be I'll go again! And I do not take his side, but the side of agreement and justice for the whole village. For only someone stupid sees nothing good in it for Lipce. Only a fool don't take what's given.'

'You're all fools, for you're keen to sell your trousers for a button. Idiots, if the squire's giving that much, happen he'll give more.'

They began to quarrel more and more heatedly, and since others supported Kłab, such a clamour arose that Jankiel came running and placed a stout bottle of vodka on the table.

'Come now, come, farmers all! Let there be accord! May Podlesie be a new Lipce! May each man be a *pan!*' he called, lining up the glasses.

Aye, they set to drinking and debating with a vengeance, and all but old Płoszka were now inclining towards agreement.

The blacksmith, who was no doubt reaping a tidy profit from it, talked the loudest, extolling the squire's honesty, and again and again standing the whole company vodka or beer, or even flavoured arak.

They rejoiced so mightily that several were rolling their eyes, tongues too thick to speak, while Kobus, who'd not yet said a word, suddenly began seizing folk by the collar and shouting:

'And what of the hired hands? What are they – the cat's paw? We're owed land too.⁴ We'll not settle for this! It's got to be fair! What's this – one can hardly drag his fat belly and another's to die of hunger? There's got to be equal land for all! Squirearchy scum! There's plenty flash their bare behinds but stick their noses in the air like they're ready to sneeze! Plague-ridden mat-heads!' he shouted, ever louder, and harassed them so obscenely that they tossed him out of the door, but he continued to stand in front of the inn, cursing and threatening.

Before long the whole company began setting off home, with only the most eager staying to have fun at the inn, where the music was thrumming already.

Evening was approaching now. The sun had descended behind the woods and the whole sky glowed in the twilight, until the tips of the wheat and orchards seemed to bask in red and gold. A damp caressing wind blew, the frogs began to croak, the quails answering, and the grasshoppers' song rattled throughout the fields like the endless rustling of ripe ears of wheat. Folk were dispersing now after the fair, so that only the rumble of carts could be heard or loud drunken singing here and there.

In Lipce, the noise had subsided and the square outside the church had emptied, but people were still sitting in front of their cottages, enjoying the cool evening air.

A quiet dusk descended on the world. The fields grew murky, melting into the sky in the distance. Everything sank into repose, slumber slowly besetting the earth and wrapping it in warm dew, while a bird trilled from an orchard now and then, as though at evening prayer. Cattle were returning from pasture with long yearning bellows, and their horned heads could be seen at the pond, which flamed crimson in the fires of sunset like burning coals.

Somewhere by the mill, boys were frolicking in the water, while from the farmyards resonated girls' songs or the bleating of sheep and the honking of geese.

Only at the Borynas' was it quiet and empty. Hanka had gone to a friend's with the children, Pietrek had disappeared somewhere and Jagusia had not been seen since vespers. Only Józka remained, busying herself with the evening chores.

The blind beggar sat on the porch, turning his face to the cool breeze and muttering a prayer while listening intently for Witek's stork, who was darting about nearby, lurking with beak at the ready, aimed at the beggar's feet.

'Well I ... get off with you, villain! Why, he's pecked me!' he muttered, drawing up his legs and waving his great rosary. The stork darted off a few paces and then again began approaching deliberately from the side, with beak outstretched.

'I can hear you! You'll not get me this time. Look at the clever bugger!' he whispered, but as the sound of music rang out in the farmyard, he began listening with pleasure to the playing while defending himself with swings of his rosary.

'Józka, who's that sawing away?'

'It's Witek! He learned from Pietrek and now he's forever scraping, till your ears ache! Witek, stop it, and give the colts some clover!' she yelled.

The sound of the fiddle subsided, and the beggar seemed to be deliberating, for as soon as Witek ran up to the cottage, he said to him very kindly:

'Take this ten groszy, since you get that fine a tune out.'

The boy was greatly pleased.

'And could you play hymns, eh?'

'I can play whatever I hear.'

'Aye, every fox praises its own tail. And can you play this tune, eh?' He bleated in his shrill plaintive way.

But Witek didn't even listen to the end. He fetched his fiddle, sat down beside him and played the exact same thing, and then ran through everything he'd ever heard in church, and so ably, that the beggar was amazed.

'Why, you'd be good for an organist!'

'I can play everything, everything, even your manor music, and the kind they sing in inns,' Witek boasted, delighted. He was wielding his bow furiously, so that the hens took to clucking on their roosts, when Hanka came up and soon chased him away to help Józka.

Outside, the world had sunk completely into darkness now. The final glow of twilight had faded, and the high dark sky was thick with stars. The village was getting ready for bed; only a few distant shouts flew from the inn and the jangling sounds of music.

Hanka sat by the porch, feeding the baby and chatting with the beggar of this and that. The old scoundrel spun yarns like the clappers, but she didn't interrupt him, lost in her own thoughts and looking longingly into the night.

Jagna had still not come back, nor was she at her mother's, for she'd gone to the village as soon as evening had come, to visit the other lasses, but was too restless to stay anywhere long. In the end she wandered through the village by herself, as though something were tugging her along by the hair. She gazed a long time into the pitch-black waters as they rippled in the breeze, at the faintly wavering shadows and the lights from the windows as they skimmed the smooth surface of the pond and faded away, no knowing where or why! Some urge impelled her to run into the meadows beyond the mill, where warm fleeces of white mist lay and lapwings flitted above her with a cry.

She listened to the water falling from the sluice into the black throat of the river under the lofty and sleepy alders, but their murmur seemed to call her plaintively, like a reproach swollen with tears.

She ran away and looked in at the miller's window, blazing with light and noisy with talk and the chinking of plates. She knocked about from one end of the village to the other, like choppy waters seeking an outlet in vain and beating piteously against impenetrable banks. Something impossible to express was eating away at her; it was neither grief, nor longing, nor loving. Her eyes were full of dry cinders and terrible raging sobs gathered in her heart.

Who knows why she found herself in front of the presbytery. Some horses were pawing the ground impatiently with their hooves by the porch and a light glowed in just one room; they were playing cards.

Having gazed her fill, she then went off between the fences separating the Kłąbs' farm from the parish priest's gardens. She moved timidly along the hedge, the low-hanging branches of the cherry trees brushing against her face with their dew-laden little leaves. She went unwittingly, not knowing where her feet were taking her, until the low house of the organist loomed in her path.

The light shone from all four windows, which stood wide open. Jagna pressed close to the shadows under the fence and looked inside.

The organist, his wife and children were sitting under a hanging lamp drinking tea, while Jasio walked about the room recounting something. She could hear every word, every creak of the floor, the constant ticking of the clock and even the organist's heavy wheezing. And Jasio held forth on such marvels that she couldn't understand a word.

She simply gazed at him as though at a holy picture, drinking in every note of his voice like the sweetest honey. He paced without stopping, would vanish into the depths of the house and then appear again in the circle of light. Sometimes he'd stop by the window, so that she squeezed against the fence in alarm that he might spot her, but he was only gazing at the sky covered in stars; or he'd say something funny so that they laughed and joy flashed across their faces like the sun. He sat down eventually next to his mother, and his little sisters began to clamber on to his knees and hang about his neck. He hugged them kindly, swung and tickled them, so that the chamber shook with childish laughter.

The clock beat the hour and the organist's wife stood up, saying:

'Chatter, chatter, and it's time for bed. You have to leave before morning.'

'I do, Mama! Lord, how short the day was!' He sighed mournfully.

And Jagusia's heart felt as though someone had gripped it so painfully that the tears ran down her face of their own accord.

'But it's the holidays before long!' he piped up again. 'The Father Director has promised to let me spend a good while at home, if our parish priest writes to him about it.'

'He will, never fear. I'll ask him!' said his mother, getting ready to make his bed on the sofa directly by the window.

They took an age to say goodbye to him. His mother took longest of all; she pressed him to her breast in tears and kissed him.

'Sleep soundly, my son. Sleep, my child.'

'I'll say my prayers and go straight to bed, Mama.'

They all dispersed at last.

Jaguś saw how they went about on tiptoe in the next room, lowering their voices and closing the windows. Soon the whole house was mute, sunk in silence in a flash, and all so that Jasio should not be disturbed.

She too wanted to go home, and had even gone a little way, but something seemed to hinder her, so that she couldn't move, couldn't manage to break free from the spot. She huddled even closer to the fence and stood as though enchanted, gazing at that last lighted open window.

Jasio read a little from a big book, then he knelt by the window, crossed himself, folded his hands, lifted his eyes to heaven and lost himself in poignantly whispered prayer.

It was deepest night. An unfathomable silence enfolded the world. A sprinkling of stars shone overhead, a warm fragrant breeze blew from the fields, making the leaves murmur from time to time, and a bird sang out.

Something began to unsettle Jagusia. Her heart thumped like mad, her eyes and her full lips burning, her hands reaching out to him of their own accord, and though she shrank into herself, she was overcome with such strange irresistible trembling that she pressed against the fence unwittingly, with such force that a stake snapped.

Jasio leaned his head out of the window, looked about and sank again into prayer.

But something incomprehensible was happening to her. Such fire ran through her bones, flooding her with heat, that she almost cried out in that pleasurable torture. She forgot where she was and could barely gasp. Every part of her was shuddering and blazing. She was shivering all over, mad burgeoning cries clustered in her like lightning, burning whirlwinds carried her off, terrible desires tensed and arched within her ... She wanted to crawl closer, towards him, to at least touch those white hands with her lips, just to kneel before him and gaze up at that lovely face and pray to it as though to a miraculous picture. But she didn't move. A strange fear coupled with dread ran through her.

'My Jesus, merciful Jesus!' A quiet moan broke from her.

Jasio got up, leaned right out of the window and, as if gazing straight at her, called:

'Who's there?'

She froze for a moment, held her breath. Her heart stopped beating and she seemed to have turned to stone in holy fear. Her soul lodged right in her throat and, full of happy disquiet, she reeled in expectation.

But Jasio just glanced about the farmyard and, spotting nothing, closed the window, undressed quickly and put out the light ...

Night fell upon her soul, but she continued to sit there for a long time, gazing at the dark mute window. The cold crept through her and seemed to pearl her soul with silvery dew, raising it heavenwards, extinguishing everything lustful that surged in her blood and flooding her with untold bliss. A solemn holy peace flowed over her, like the musing of flowers before the setting of the sun, so that she was lost in a prayer of happiness, which had no words and only the strange sweetness of elation, the soul's holy awe, the incomprehensible joy of a spring day waking and interspersed with the heavy beads of beatific tears like a rosary of the Lord's mercy and of thanksgiving.

CHAPTER 3

'Can I go now, Hanka?' begged Józka, resting her head on the pew.

'Aye, to flick your tail like a calf and run about!' Hanka rebuked her, lifting her eyes from her rosary.

'When my stomach's churning and I feel dizzy ...'

'Stop bothering us. It'll soon be over.'

The priest was ending a quiet Mass for Boryna's soul, requested by the family to mark the octave of his death.¹ All their nearest and dearest sat in the side altars, while Jagusia and her mother were kneeling at the altar itself. There were no strangers, only Agata loudly rattling off her prayers somewhere by the choir.

The church was quiet, cool and murky, but for a great glowing stream of light rippling down the middle where the sun beat straight through the open doors, pouring in right to the pulpit.

The organist's Michał was serving Mass and, as always, rang the little bells so hard it made your ears ache. He bawled the responses, his eyes darting after the swallows that occasionally blundered, confused, into the church, twittering in trepidation.

Somewhere from the pond came the slap and smack of laundry paddles. Swallows chirped beyond the windows. From the graveyard a cackling mother hen would sometimes lead a whole brood of chirping chicks into the church porch, so that Ambrozy had to chase them out.

As soon as the priest had finished they all went to the graveyard. They were already by the belfry when Ambrozy called after them:

'Wait on! Father wants to speak to you.'

The priest came running less than a Hail Mary later, a breviary under his arm, panting and wiping his bald head. He greeted them with a kind word and said:

'My dears, I wanted to say that it was a Christian thing to order a holy Mass for the departed. It will ease his soul and help him towards eternal salvation. It will help, I tell you!'

He took a little snuff, sneezed violently and, wiping his nose, asked:

'Today you'll no doubt be conferring about the divisions, eh?'

'Aye, that's the custom, not till the octave,' they confirmed.

'Exactly so! That's what I wanted to talk to you about! Divide it up, but remember: in harmony and justly. Let me not hear about conflicts and quarrels, or you'll know about it from the pulpit!'

The dead man will turn in the grave if he sees you're tearing apart the hard-won fruit of his toil like wolves with a sheep! And God forbid you harm any orphan! Grzela is far away, and Józka's but a silly chit! And if someone is owed, you hand it over entirely, to the last grosz. Whatever he decreed for his wealth he decreed, but his will must be carried out. Maybe the poor wretch is watching you this moment and is thinking to himself: "I raised them and left a decent farm, surely they'll not savage each other like dogs at the divisions." As I always say from the pulpit: all things in the world rest on accord, no one built anything yet on quarrels. Not a thing, I say, but sin and offence to God. And remember the church too. The departed was a generous man and whether for candles, or Masses or other needs, he never begrudged a grosz and that is why the Lord God blessed him ...' He went on at length so that the women began to cry and clasp his knees in gratitude, while Józka even fell into his arms with a howl. He gathered her to his breast and, kissing her on the head, said kindly:

'Don't bawl, silly girl. The Lord God holds orphans in his special care.'

'Why your own kin couldn't be kinder,' whispered Hanka, deeply touched.

It seemed the priest too was moved, for having furtively wiped his eyes, he offered the blacksmith some snuff and quickly began to talk of something else.

'Well, will there be agreement with the squire?'

'There will. Five have gone to see him even today ...'

'Well, praise God! I'll say a holy Mass in this intention for agreement and take nothing for it!'

'It seems to me the village should club together for a votive Mass and Exposition! Why, it's like new distributions and all for free!'

'You've good sense, Michał. I spoke to the squire about you. Well, go with God, and remember: peace and justice! But Michał!' he called after him. 'Take a look at my fly later – the right spring is rubbing against the axle ...'

'It was the squire from Łaznów mangled it.'

The priest did not reply to that and they went straight home. Jagusia brought up the rear, leading her mother, since the old woman trudged with difficulty, needing to rest frequently.

It was an ordinary working day and empty on the road around the pond, except for a few children playing here and there in the sand and chickens scraping at the chucked-out dung. It was still early, but the sun was beginning to scorch already. Luckily there was a cool wind, which blew exuberantly, rocking the orchards, now full of reddening cherries, and beating the wheat against the fences like a stormy sea.

Cottages and gates stood open everywhere. Bedding was airing on the fences here and there and anyone fit to work was in the fields. Someone was still belatedly carting the last of the scythed hay, so that the smell fair tickled the nostrils, and fistfuls of stalks trembled like Jews' beards from the branches that drooped over the road where the heaped-up carts drove by.

They walked slowly and in silence, deliberating over the divisions.

Somewhere, perhaps from the fields where people were earthing up potatoes, a song would break free, carried along the wind to who knows where, while by the mill a woman could be heard slapping a washing paddle so hard the sound echoed far and wide while the waters fell noisily under the millwheels.

'Mill never stops now!' Magda was first to speak.

'When scarcity bites hardest, it's harvest-time for the miller!'

'Worse this year than last. Poverty wherever you turn, and the hired hands are downright starving,' Hanka said with a sigh.

'The Koziołs are on the prowl too. It's but a matter of time before they make off with something,' threw in the blacksmith.

'Ah don't! The poor wretches are saving themselves any way they can. Yesterday Kozłowa sold the organist's wife some ducklings, so that were some help ...'

'They'll soon drink it away. I say nothing against 'em, but it seems strange to me that my Maciuś found the feathers from my drake which disappeared at father's burial behind their byre,' remarked Magda.

'And who took our bedding that time?' interrupted Józka.

'And how's their case with the Voyts going?'

'Slow, but Płoszka's supporting 'em, so they'll get right under the Voyt's skin before they're done.'

'That Płoszka always likes to poke his nose in others' business.'

'Of course, he's gathering friends, for the voytship's smelling sweet!'

Jankiel crossed their path, pulling a hobbled horse by the mane. It was kicking its heels and resisting with all its might.

'Stick some pepper under its tail and it'll shoot from the spot like a stallion.'

'May your laughter do you good! The trouble I have with this horse!'

'Stuff it with straw, stick on a new tail and take it to the fair. Maybe someone'll buy it for a cow, for it's no use as a horse!' Michał joked. They all burst out laughing as the horse broke free, jumped into the pond and, ignoring Jankiel's pleas and threats, began to roll about, calm as can be.

'He's a canny son-of-a-bitch, must be a Gypsy horse!'

'Stand him a bucket of vodka and maybe he'll come out!' said the organist's wife, laughing, as she sat by the pond beside a brood of ducklings like golden buttons, swimming in the water. A ruffled hen was clucking away on the bank.

'Beautiful little brood – must be Kozłowa's?' asked Hanka.

'Yes, and they keep running away to the pond! Duckie! Duckie, duckie, duckie!' she called, throwing handfuls of millet to lure them out.

But the ducklings sped away to the other bank, so that she had to run after them.

'Hurry up, you women,' the blacksmith urged. After they had entered the cottage and Hanka was busying herself with making breakfast, he began to examine all the rooms and farmstead, not even overlooking the potato pit, until Hanka said:

'You're checking everything over as though something's missing!'

'I'm not buying a pig in a poke!'

'You know every last thing better than I do myself!' she said bitingly as she poured coffee into the mugs. 'Dominikowa, Jaguś, come join us!' she called to the other side of the cottage where both had shut themselves away.

Taking their places at the benches, they all drank, chewing on bread.

No one spoke or knew how to begin; everyone hesitated, looking to the others. Hanka too was strangely reserved. Aye, she urged them to eat, for sure, adding to everyone's plate, but she hardly took her eyes from the blacksmith, who was fidgeting on the spot, flashing his eyes about the chamber and clearing his throat. Jagusia sat sullen and sighing, her eyes shining as though with recent tears, while Dominikowa spread out like a brood hen and whispered to her from time to time. All except for Józka, who prattled nineteen to the dozen, in her usual way, as she watched over the pans full of bubbling potatoes.

It was growing tedious for everyone. At last the blacksmith began:

'So, how are we to do the division?'

Hanka winced. Drawing herself up, she said calmly and showing she'd thought the matter over:

'How indeed! I'm just minding my husband's property here and haven't the right to decide anything. You can do the divisions when Antek comes back.'

'When's that going to be? Things can't stay this way, after all.'

'They can! If they could right through Father's illness, then they can till Antek gets back.'

'He's not the only one concerned.'

'But he's the eldest, so it's for him to take up the farm after his father.'

'Ha, he's the same right as the other children.'

'Well, happen you can take it, after you've agreed with Antek. I'm not going to quarrel with you, it's not up to me here.'

'Jaguś!' Dominikowa raised her voice. 'Remind 'em what's yours.'

'Why should I, they all remember well enough ...'

Hanka reddened suddenly, and kicking Łąpa who'd got underfoot, she declared through gritted teeth:

'Aye, we well remember injustice.'

'You don't say! It's a question of six morgen which the departed wrote over to Jagusia and not just stupid words!' said Dominikowa.

'If you've got the settlement, no one's going to tear it out o' your hands!' grunted Magda crossly, sitting quietly all the while, her baby at her breast.

'Well, we have, signed official, and with witnesses.'

'Everyone's waiting, so Jagusia can too.'

'Of course she must, but what's hers she can take straight away. She has a cow with a calf, and a pig and geese ...'

'That's held in common and will be divided,' the blacksmith asserted firmly.

'Divided! You wish! No one can take what she brought in her dowry! And maybe you'd like her dresses and quilts to be divided among you, eh?' Dominikowa raised her voice further.

'I spoke in jest and you're out with the claws ...'

'Aye ... I've got my eye on you, aye ...'

'Well, why chatter here in vain. You spoke true, Hanka, we've got to wait for Antek. I'm in a hurry to see the squire – they're waiting for me already.' He got up, and seeing Father's sheepskin hanging in the corner on a pole, he began to pull it down.

'That'd be just right for me.'

'Don't touch it, let it dry,' Hanka protested.

'Well, you'll let the boots go, then. The uppers are just about decent, and have been patched in any case,' he coaxed cunningly, pulling them down from the pole.

'I'll not allow a thing to be disturbed! If you take anything, they'll be saying I squandered half the farm. Let them do an inventory first. Not a single stake from the fences will I allow to be touched till it's all written down official!'

'There's been no inventory but Father's bedding's gone already ...' said Magda.

'I said what happened! Right after he died we hung it on the fence and someone stole it in the night. There were too much for one head to manage.'

'Strange that a thief just popped up ...'

'Meaning what? I took it, and now I'm lying?'

'Quiet, you women! Less of the quarrelling – leave it, Magduś! May whoever stole it make a shroud of it.'

'The quilt itself was little short of thirty pounds in weight.'

'Shut your trap, I'm telling you,' he yelled at his wife. He led Hanka outside, seemingly to look at the piglets. She followed him, but remained on her guard.

'I wanted to advise you on something.'

Curious, she pricked up her ears, with some inkling of what he might be skirting around.

'You know, before the listings, you should bring two of the cows over to mine. The sow can be entrusted to a cousin. Then hide whatever you can with folk ... I'll tell you where ... As for the wheat, you can say at the inventory that it was long since sold to Jankiel. He'll confirm it willingly enough. You can give him a bushel for it. The miller can take the colt, it can fatten on his pastures. And the tools and wares could be hidden in the potato pit, or in the rye. I'm advising you out of sincere friendship! Everyone with a bit o' sense does it. You've worked like an ox, so you justly deserve more. You can give me whatever, some crumb. And never you fear – I'll help you in everything. I make it my business that you should stay on the land. Just mark my words, there's no one around gives better advice ... the squire himself is happy to listen to me. Well, what do you say?'

'Only that I won't let go of what's mine, and I'm not greedy for what's someone else's,' she replied slowly, fixing him with contemptuous eyes.

Reeling as though he'd received a blow to the head, he ran his eyes over her, and hissed:

'I'd not even mention that you fleeced Father pretty well ...'

'Go ahead and mention it! I'll tell Antek. He can talk to you about that advice of yours.'

Barely suppressing his curses, he just spat and walked quickly away, shouting into the chamber through the open window:

'Keep an eye on everything, Magda, lest burglars walk off with more.'

Hanka watched him with a mocking laugh.

He rushed off as though scalded and, bumping into the Voyt's wife as she was turning into the farmyard, he expounded something to her at length, shaking his fists.

The Voyt's wife had brought some official letter.

'It's for you Hanka, the lackey² brought it from the chancellery.'

'Maybe it's about Antek!' she whispered in alarm, taking hold of the letter through her apron.

'Or Grzela maybe. My husband's away, gone to the *powiat*, but the messenger said only that it's written here that Grzela's died or something ...'

'Jesus, Mary!' cried Józka.

Magda too leapt to her feet.

They all looked at the piece of paper with dread and fear, turning it over helplessly in their trembling hands.

'Jaguś, maybe you can make it out,' begged Hanka.

They stood over her, full of dismay and alarm, but Jagna, disheartened after a long moment of trying to spell out the syllables, retorted:

'Ha, when it's not written in our letters I cannot understand it.'³

'Cause she weren't there when it were written! She's other better skills instead!' hissed the Voyt's wife provocatively.

'Get over to your own side and leave people be, seeing as they pass you by from a distance like a bad smell,' snarled the old woman.

But the Voyt's wife, as though glad of the chance, retaliated:

'You berate others all right, so why don't you forbid your darling daughter to lead other folk's husbands astray, eh!'

'Give over, Pietrowa!' Hanka interrupted, marking where things were headed, but the Voyt's wife was getting even more carried away.

'I'll get it off my chest for once! I've had that much grief at her hands, that much suffering, I'll not let those wrongs pass while I live!'

'Get on with it, then! A dog'll bark you down!' the old woman muttered quite calmly, whereas Jaguś had turned red as a beetroot. Though she burned with the shame of it, some kind of vengeful stubbornness was also gathering in her heart, so that she lifted her head ever higher, as though in defiance, and deliberately fixed her accuser with mocking eyes and a provocative smile on her lips.

The Voyt's wife now opened her mouth wide as a gate and, utterly exasperated by the look in Jagna's eyes, began to fulminate, vehemently listing every crime.

'You're drunk on fury and mouthing any old thing!' the old woman interrupted her. 'But your husband will answer gravely before God for Jagusia's misfortune.'

'Aye, he will that, for he didn't mislead some innocent child! Aye, a child who'll go round the back of a bush with anyone!'

'Shut your mouth. I may be blind but I can still feel my way to your mophead,' threatened Dominikowa, squeezing her stick in her fist.

'Just try! Just you touch me, go on!' the other goaded her.

'Ha, she's fed on other people's injuries and now she wants to latch on to them like a burr to a dog's tail.'

'How have I injured you, how?'

'You'll find out soon enough, when they stick your man in the slammer!'

The Voyt's wife leapt forwards with raised fists, but luckily Hanka managed to drag her off in time before turning sharply on them both.

'For God's sake, you women, you're making an inn of my house.'

Gasping and panting, they fell silent in an instant at this. Tears even ran from under the rag bound around Dominikowa's eyes and streamed down her gaunt face, but she was first to pull herself together and, sitting down, she spread her hands and said with a sigh:

'Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner!'

The Voyt's wife fled the house like a madwoman, but turning back, she stuck her head through the window and called out to Hanka:

'I'm telling you, throw that creature out! Banish her while you can, so you don't regret it later! Don't leave her another hour under your roof, for she'll turn you out, that devil! Take my advice, Hanka, and defend yourself! Show her no mercy, no compassion! She's just waiting for your husband. You'll soon see what she cooks up for you!' She leaned further into the room and, threatening Jaguś with her fists, shouted, beside herself with all anger:

'Just you wait, you hellcat, just you wait! I'll not die peaceful, I'll not go to holy confession till I live to see you driven out the village with sticks! Get off to the soldiers, you bitch! That's your place, pigspawn!' And she rushed away. Inside, the room was silent as the grave.

Dominikowa was shaking with suppressed sobs, Magda rocked her baby, Hanka stared into the fire deep in thought, while Jaguś, though there was still a look of arrogance on her face and a malicious smile on her lips, was white as a sheet, for those last words had struck deep into her heart. She felt as though a hundred knives had stabbed her at once and every wound was bleeding freely, leaving only untold sorrow, downright inhuman sorrow. She wanted to beat her head against a wall and cry to high heaven, but she restrained herself. Tugging her mother by the sleeve, she whispered feverishly:

'Come, Mother, let's go! Come quick! Let's leave this place!'

'All right! I feel quite weak, but you must return and guard to the end what's yours.'

'I'll not stay here. I'm that sick of it all, I cannot stand it! If my legs were broken, I'd not enter here!'

'Was it so bad for you with us, eh?' whispered Hanka.

'Worse than for a dog on a chain. Hell must be better.'

'Strange you bore it so long. No one tied you by the pins. You could always leave. Don't worry, no one's going to clasp you by the legs and I'll not be begging you to stay!'

'Well, I'm going, and the plague take you, if that's how you are!'

'Don't start, or I'll throw my own ills in your face!'

'When everyone's against me, the whole village, all of it!'

'Live decently and no one'll hurl a mean word!'

'Quiet, Jaguś. Why, Hanka's not against you. Quiet!' said her mother.

'Nay, let her mouth off, let her! She can put her mouthing you know where. What did I do so bad? Steal? Did I kill someone, eh?'

'Have you got the nerve to ask?' Hanka declared in amazement, standing in front of her. 'Don't pull me by the tongue, or I might say something!'

'Go on then! Let's have it! It's all the same to me!' Jagna shrieked ever more vehemently, the anger in her flaring like fire. She was ready for anything, even the worst.

Hanka's eyes suddenly filled with tears. The memory of Antek's betrayals ate away so painfully at her heart that she could barely stammer:

'And what did you get up to with my husband, eh? The Lord God'll punish you on my account, you'll see! ... You gave him no peace ... chased after him like a bitch on heat ... like a ...'

Heaving with sobs, she was unable to catch her breath.

And Jaguś braced herself like a wolf cornered in its den, its fangs ready to rip apart anything that approached. Hatred erupted in her, turning her head, and vindictiveness stiffened her claws until she leapt into the middle of the room. Maddened to the core, she began to lash out with choked words like a whistling whip:

'I ran after him! Me! You lying dog! Everyone knows how I tried chasing him off! Why, he whined like a puppy under the trees just for the sight o' my shoe! It were him forced me! Him who befuddled me so I let him do what he wanted, like an idiot! And I'll tell you the truth now, though you'll rue the telling. He loved me to distraction! And he'd grown sick of you like a dirty old rag. The poor wretch had had it up to the ears with your loving, till it made him belch like rancid fat, so that he just spat when he thought of you. He were ready to do himself harm just to have you out of his sight. You wanted the truth, you've got it. And remember this for good measure: you can even kiss his feet, it'll make no difference. If I want, he'll kick you aside and run off into the world with me! You mark that well and don't you compare yourself with me, understand, eh?'

She cried out viciously, in control of herself now, fearless and beautiful as never before. Even her mother listened to her with astonishment and fear. She appeared so different, completely other, and at the same time terrible somehow, wicked and dangerous, like a cloud hurling thunderbolts.

These words struck Hanka a mortal blow; they cut her to the quick, lashing her with neither mercy nor compassion and crushing her like a miserable worm. She collapsed like a tree split apart by lightning, without strength or consciousness. Barely able to gasp through blanched lips, she fell on to the bench, the pain grinding everything within her to fine, barren sand. Even the tears ceased to run down her face, ashen with suffering, though a heavy storm of sobbing tore at her breast. Staring ahead of her as into some wide-open abyss, she trembled like a blade of grass that the wind tosses to its destruction ...

Jaguś had long finished and gone to the other side of the house with her mother. Magda too had left, unable to get through to Hanka. Even Józka had run off to the pond after the ducks. Still she sat in the same spot, like a dead bird whose fledglings are picked off one by one. Unable to shout or fight or run away, they can only flap a wing from time to time and cheep pitifully ...

Until the Lord Jesus took pity on her, bestowing relief on her tortured soul. Coming to her senses, Hanka fell down in front of the holy pictures, burst into torrents of tears and offered to go to Częstochowa if only everything she'd heard would not prove to be true!

And towards Jagusia she felt no anger, but only fear, and at the sound of her voice, she crossed herself as though warding off evil ...

She set about her tasks at last and, accustomed to the work, her hands did everything almost of their own accord. In her thoughts she was somewhere far away, not even realizing that she'd taken the children into the orchard, that she'd tidied the room and, having filled the double pots, hurried Józka to rue them more quickly to the workers in the fields.

And when she was left alone and had calmed down a little, she began to weigh up and ruminate on every word. Being a clever woman and a good one, she easily dismissed the insult and injury to herself, but she could not ignore her bruised pride and felt the burning sting of it once again. Her heart clenched in torment, and visions of bloody revenge flew about her head, until, finally overcoming them, she whispered:

'Aye, I can't equal her in beauty – too bad! But I'm his wife and the mother of his children!' She swelled with pride and confidence. 'And if he runs after her, he'll come back! After all, he can't marry her!' she comforted herself bitterly, looking out into the world.

Noon was approaching and the sun hung over the pond. The heat had intensified, searing the earth, and the fiery air blew hot as a stove. People were returning from the fields, and the bellowing of cattle could be heard as they were driven along the poplar road among clouds of dust, when a sudden resolve seemed to come to Hanka. She leaned against the wall, thought for another Hail Mary or so, then wiped her eyes, crossed the hallway to Jagusia's room, and said firmly and completely calm:

'Get out of this house right now!'

Jagna rose from the bench and they stood face to face, each taking the measure of the other for a long moment until Hanka stepped back from the threshold a little and repeated in a hoarse voice:

'Get out this minute or I'll tell the farmhand to throw you out ... This second!' she added implacably.

The old woman leapt towards her to remonstrate and explain, but Jaguś only shrugged:

'Don't talk to that drudge! It's obvious what she's after.'

She took a piece of paper from the bottom of the chest.

'If it's the settlement you want, the morgen, then take it and gorge yourself on it!' She spoke contemptuously, throwing the paper in her face: 'I hope you choke to death on it.'

Ignoring her mother's protests, she began hurriedly to tie up her bundles and take them out to the yard.

Hanka came over faint, as though someone had punched her between the eyes, but she picked up the paper and addressed Jagna threateningly:

'Faster, or I'll set the dogs on you!'

Speechless with astonishment, Hanka couldn't get her head around it, that it was true. Why, she'd tossed aside a whole six morgen of fields like a cracked jug! Why, she must be wrong in the head, she thought, following her with her eyes.

Jagna meanwhile, ignoring her, set about taking down the pictures when Józka came running in shrieking:

'And give back the beads; they're mine after my mother, mine ...'

Jagna began to unwind them from around her neck, but suddenly she stopped.

'No, I shan't! Maciej gave them to me, so they're mine now!'

Józka flew into such a rage that Hanka had to shout her down to give over, for Jaguś seemed utterly deaf to all provocation. Having taken all her things outside, she ran to get Jędrzych.

Dominikowa opposed nothing now, nor did she respond to Hanka's remarks or Józka's clamouring, but when they'd finally loaded the things on to the cart, she rose and declared with a shake of her fist:

'May the very worst not pass you by!'

Hanka fair froze, but ignoring her words she called out:

'When Witek drives back the cattle, he'll bring your cow over, and for the rest let someone come in the evening and round 'em up.'

They left in silence, turned into the road and slowly went round the pond at the very edge, so that they were reflected in the water.

Hanka gazed after them a long while, strangely vexed and gloomy, but since she had no time for pondering, as the hired hands were coming back from the fields, she hid the settlement back in the chest and locked it, closed the door to Father's side and set about preparing dinner. But all afternoon she went about ill at ease and silent, even unwilling to lend an ear to Jagustynka's flattering words.

'You did right! Should have thrown her out long ago. She's spoilt rotten, for who can do owt to her when the old woman's hand in glove with the parish priest! He'd have cursed anyone else from the pulpit long since!'

'Aye, for sure!' she echoed, moving off in order not to hear any more. When everyone had gone back to work, she took Józka and they went to weed the flax, for in places the quickweed had grown so thick the strips glowed yellow from a distance. She applied herself eagerly to the task, but despite this she was tormented by the memory of Dominikowa's threats, which filled her with considerable fear, though mainly she pondered what Antek would say to it all.

'He'll cheer up when I show him the settlement. The fool! Six morgen, that's nigh on a whole farm!' she thought, glancing about the fields.

'Do you know, we clean forgot that letter about Grzela.'

'True! Stop, Józia, and I'll run to the priest – he'll read it.'

She was even glad at the thought of being among other people; she'd learn what they were saying about the whole business.

After gathering herself together a bit in the house, she took the letter from behind the picture and went straight to the presbytery. She did not find the priest, however. He was in the fields with his hired hands, thinning the carrots; she saw him from a distance, stripped down to his trousers and a straw hat. She didn't dare come nearer, fearing that he must know already and would be ready to scold her in front of people. So she went to find the miller, who was just at that moment testing a saw with Mateusz.

'My wife was telling me but a moment ago how you flushed out your stepmother! Ho, ho, seems like a wagtail but she's got the talons of a hawk!' he said with a laugh and set about reading the letter. But no sooner had he glanced at it than he cried out: 'Bad news! Your Grzela has drowned! It was back at Easter! They say you can collect his things from the head of the *powiat* ...'

'Grzela dead! Dear God! So young and healthy! He was but in his twenty-sixth year! He was meant to be back for harvest. Drowned, in the water! Merciful Jesus!' she moaned, wringing her hands, for the news had distressed her sorely.

'These legacies come easy to you, easy!' Mateusz piped up mockingly. 'Now you need only see off Józka and it'll all be yours and the blacksmith's ...'

'Have you finished with Tereska and now you're thinking of Jagusia?' she snapped back, so that the miller burst out laughing, and began to fiddle most attentively with the saw.

'You'll not pull the wool over that one's eyes, a plucky piece!' the miller said after her.

On the way back Hanka stepped in at Magda's. She burst into tears on hearing the news and, sobbing woefully, said:

'God's will, my dear. Aye, strong as an oak, few like him in Lipce – oh human fate, unhappy fate! Today you live and tomorrow you perish. Michał can go get the things; why should they be lost to us. Poor wretch, and he wanted to be home so badly!'

'It's all in God's hands. And he never had any luck with water – do you remember how he near drowned in the pond and Kłab only just saved him? Seems it were written he would die that way!'

They lamented, cried together and then parted, for each had daily troubles and vexations aplenty of her own, particularly Hanka.

The news spread round the village in a flash. Coming down from the fields at dusk, they were already talking of it; aye, Grzela was sorely mourned, whereas Jagusia had the village split in two.

All the women, the older ones in particular, took Hanka's side, vehemently turning on Jagusia, for whom the men spoke up, though timidly, so that in places disputes were already brewing ...

And before dusk had fallen, the village was humming like a hive. One busybody ran to the next to gossip, some shouted to each other across the fences and orchards, or chattered with passers-by in the farmyards as they milked the cows. It was a pleasant evening, fragrant though a little cool. The sky was still decked all in the pale gold of sunset. The chirping of grasshoppers and the call of quails floated from the fields, while frogs croaked sleepily in the ditches and marshes. Throughout the village the clamour of children mingled with singing, the lowing of cattle, neighing, bleating, honking and the rattle of carts, while along the roads, by the pond and wherever anyone met, there was incessant talk of the events, or what would come of that day's meeting with the squire.

Returning from the sawmill, Mateusz listened here and there, but just spat, cursed quietly and avoided the chattering gossips. The ones mouthing off in front of the Płoszkas' truly incensed him, though. Unable to hold back, he said, enraged:

'Hanka had no right to throw her out – she were in her rightful place. Antek's wife'll pay the price for that – she could end up inside!'

Fat, flushed Płoszkowa shouted him down:

'Hanka's not denying her the land, that's clear! But with Antek coming back any day, it were something else she feared! Ha, try keeping watch on a thief in the house! Or was she meant to turn a blind eye, eh?'

'A fuss about nothing. You say whatever comes into your heads, though not out o' justice, but pure envy!'

He might as well have tossed a stick among wasps, the way they all hurled themselves at him.

'And what's there for us to envy, eh? That she's a hussy and a tart, that you men chase after her like dogs, that everyone's keen to climb under her quilt, that she's the cause of shame to the whole village, and an offence to God?'

'Maybe that's what bothers you. A dog might understand it, but it's beyond me! Blasted old brooms, scared to be out in the sun. If she were like Magda from the inn and done her worst, you'd let it pass, but because she's more beautiful than any of you, every one of you would drown her in a spoonful of water.'

They raised such a hue and cry at that, he had to run away.

'May your damn tongues shrivel!' he cursed. Going past Dominikowa's cottage, he looked in at the open windows. The lights were lit inside but he couldn't see Jagusia and hesitated to go in, so he just sighed, turning back to his own cottage. Then he ran into Weronka, on her way to her sister's.

'I was just at yours. Stacho's prepared the logs and dug the foundations, so the wood can be cut. When can you come?'

'When? When pigs fly! I'm that sick of this village, I think I'll chuck it all in and head off wherever my feet carry me,' he called angrily and went off.

'Something's bitten him good and proper!' she thought, turning to the Borynas'.

Hanka was clearing away after supper but took her quickly to one side, telling her all that had happened. Weronka thoughtfully overlooked the Jaguś business, but just said of Grzela:

'If he's died, then his portion comes to you in the divisions.'

'True, I'd not thought of that.'

'And then with what the squire's got to give for the woods, there'll be half a volok coming to each, and only three of you! My God, even a death turns to profit for the wealthy,' she said, sighing mournfully.

'What do I care about wealth!' Hanka defended herself, but as soon as they'd parted to go to bed, she began calculating and secretly rejoicing. Then she knelt down to her prayers and whispered with resignation, 'Since he's died, it must be God's will,' and she sighed sincerely for his soul.

The next day around noon, Ambrozy came in.

'Where've you been?' Hanka asked, lighting the fire in the hearth.

'At the Koziols'. A child were scalded to death. They called for me, but there's only a coffin needed there and a burial.'

'Which one was it?'

'The smallest one she brought from Warsaw before spring. Fell into a tub of boiling water and almost cooked.'

'She don't have much luck with those foundlings.'

'She don't. There's no loss, though, since the burial gets paid for! But that's not why I've come.'

She raised worried eyes to him.

'You know Dominikowa's gone with Jagusia to the court, to accuse you of throwing out her daughter ...'

'Let her, what can she do!'

'She was at confession in the morning, then conspiring a long time with the priest. Aye, I weren't listening, only saying what I gleaned, six of one and half a dozen o' the other. Priest were shaking his fist the way she were complaining of you.'

'A priest and he sticks his nose in other people's business!' she declared impetuously, but so unnerved was she by the news that she went about distracted all day, full of trepidation and fearing the worst.

At dusk, some cart stopped by the fence.

She ran out of the cottage, scared and trembling. The Voyt was sitting in a britchka.

'You've heard about Grzela already!' he began. 'A misfortune and no mistake! But I have good news for you too: either today, or tomorrow at the latest, Antek will be back!'

'Are you not misleading me?' She did not dare believe it.

'It's the Voyt that says so, so you'd better believe it! They told me in the offices ...'

'It's good he's coming back, high time!' she said coolly, as though quite unmoved. The Voyt considered for a second and said, very amicably:

'You did badly by Jagusia! She's already lodged a complaint, they could punish you for lawlessness and violence. You had no right to touch her, she were in her rightful place. That'll be something, if Antek comes back and you go in! I'm telling you out of pure friendship, put this right! I'll do what I can for the complaint to be withdrawn from court, but the injury you must undo yourself.'

Hanka drew herself up and said point blank:

'Who are you defending, an injured party or your lover?'

He brought the whip down with such force the horses were away with a single bound.

CHAPTER 4

What with all these various and trying ordeals, Hanka could not sleep a wink that night, and what's more she kept thinking she could hear footsteps in the farmyard, or in the road, or even right by the cottage. She listened, heart thumping, but the whole house was deeply slumbering. Even the children didn't grizzle. The night was still, though quite clear, with stars looking in at the windows. Sometimes the trees murmured, and from midnight a wind rose, gusting now and then.

Inside the chamber it was hot and stuffy, and a nasty reek came from the ducks sleeping under the beds, but Hanka didn't feel like opening the window. Sleep had abandoned her entirely, the quilt scorched her and the pillows were burning, hot as tinplate, so that she tossed from side to side, ever more anxious. Wild notions of every kind were swarming in her head, like an anthill, making her skin crawl with sweat and setting off such fits of trembling that, unable to overcome her fear, she leapt from the bed suddenly. In just her smock, gripping an axe that seemed to have found its own way into her hand, she went outside.

All the doors stood wide open, though the deep silence of sleep lay everywhere. Pietrek was snoring, stretched out by the stable. The horses nibbled their fodder, jangling the chains of their bridles, while the cows, which hadn't been tied up for the night in the byre, had wandered all over the yard and lay chewing and smacking their dribbling lips, raising their heavy horned heads and the unfathomable black globes of their eyes at her approach.

She returned to bed and lay, eyes open, listening out fearfully again, for there were moments when she could have sworn that voices resounded clearly and dull distant steps.

'Maybe they're awake somewhere and talking!' she tried reasoning with herself, but just as soon as the windows grew a little grey, she got up and, throwing on Antek's sheepskin, went outside.

Witek's stork was sleeping on the porch, standing on one leg, its head tucked under its wing, and in the yard flocks of geese huddled in white clumps. The tips of the trees were poking out of the night, dew dripping copiously from their crowns, tapping against the leaves and grass in the bracing and refreshing chilly breeze. The fields were enveloped in a low blue haze from which only the tallest trees rose here and there, spurting upwards like thick black smoke. The pond shimmered like a great blind eye buried under darkness. The canopies of alders rustled above it, quiet and timorous, and all around everything still slept, sunk in grey impenetrable mist and silence.

Hanka sat on the earth bench and, nestling against the wall, she must have dozed off for the space of a good few prayers, for when she woke, the night had grown quite pale and the east flamed red like a distant afterglow.

'If they left early enough, they could be here any time!' she thought, peering out at the road. Feeling fortified after that short sleep, she did not return to bed, but in order to pass the time before sunrise, she brought out some children's clothes and set off to the pond to do some washing.

The day began to dawn more quickly, and soon the first cockerel crowed, and after him others began flapping their wings and crying loudly throughout the whole village, then the skylarks began to sing, but intermittently as yet, and fences, whitewashed walls and dewy lanes began slowly to emerge from the low-lying gloom.

Hanka was scrubbing doggedly when suddenly from somewhere close by came the sound of quiet footsteps. She froze to the spot like a rabbit, looking about intently; a shadow was crossing Balcerkowa's farmstead and gliding under the trees.

'To Marysia's, indeed, but who?' she wondered, unable to recognize whoever it was, when the shadow suddenly vanished and without a trace. 'So haughty, so pleased with her own looks, but lets lads in at night! Who'd have thought!'

She was scandalized, and then noticed the miller's man sneaking along from the other end of the village.

'Must be from the inn, from Magda's! Knocking about in the night like wolves. What goings-on!' She sighed, yet felt a pleasurable shiver herself, and stretched from time to time, but the water was chilly so the urge passed quickly. She began to sing in a hushed and wistful voice 'When Glows the Light of Dawn'.¹

The song drifted low upon the dew, sinking into the pink dawn.

It was time to get up, and soon the sound of voices, windows opening and the clatter of clogs could be heard throughout the village.

As soon as she'd hung out the laundry on the fence, Hanka ran to wake her own household, but they were so weary with sleep that whenever a head lifted, it fell back at once without waking.

She was more than a little cross when Pietrek shouted at her from above, 'Son-of-a-bitch! There's time yet, I'm sleeping till sun's up!' and wouldn't budge.

The children too began to grizzle, and Józka complained piteously:

'Just a bit longer, Hanuś! I've only just fallen asleep ...'

She lulled the children, let out the poultry from the sheds, and right before sunrise, after waiting for the space of another prayer, when the sky above was aflame and dawn had flushed the pond red, she made such merry hell that they had to relinquish their lairs. She then soundly scolded Witek, who was loitering sleepily, scratching and rubbing himself against the quoins.

'You'll soon wake up when I give you a good hiding. Why did you not tie the cows to their mangers, you monster! Do you want them to gore each other's bellies in the dark?'

He made some rude retort and luckily didn't wait as she rushed at him, so glancing in at the stable, she picked on Pietrek instead.

'The horses are ringing their teeth against empty mangers and you're lazing till sun-up!'

'You're squawking like a magpie for rain. The whole village can hear!' he muttered.

'Let 'em hear! Let 'em know what an idler and layabout you are! You wait till the master's back – he'll sort you out, you'll see! Józka!' Now she was yelling to the other side of the yard. 'The skewbald's got swollen udders: milk her good and proper, so's you don't leave any behind again! And hurry with the milking, they're driving the cows out already in the village! Witek! Take your breakfast and get 'em out, and you lose a sheep like you did yesterday and I'll deal with you!' Spinning like a top, she marshalled them: she threw the chickens handfuls of grain; brought out the swill pail for the pigs squealing by the cottage; prepared a drink for the calf that had been taken from its mother; and sprinkled cooked groats for the ducklings before chasing them off to the pond. Witek got a thump on the back and breakfast in his bag and she even remembered the stork, who was skulking about and clattering, placing a cauldron on the porch with yesterday's potatoes for him to peck and eat. She was everywhere, remembered everything and knew how best to tackle every task.

And when Witek had driven off the cows and sheep, she set about Pietrek, whose idle loitering she could not bear.

'Clear the dung out the byre! It's hot for the cows at night and they roll about like pigs.'

The sun had just peered out in the distance, fixing the world with its hot red eye, when the hired hands started to gather, come to work in kind for their linen and potato strips.

She urged Józka to peel the potatoes, put her baby to the breast and, covering herself with her apron, said:

'Keep an eye on everything! If Antek comes back, send word to the cabbage patch. Come on, you women, we'll earth up the cabbages a bit while there's still dew and it's cooler, and after breakfast we'll go back to yesterday's work.'

She led them out beyond the mill to the low meadows and wetlands still grey with dew and mist. The peaty earth was pliant underfoot like strips of leather, while in places it was so swampy they had to skirt round it. Fetid water stood in furrows that were deep as ditches and covered in green duckweed.

There was no one out on the cabbage fields yet, save for lapwings circling the strips and storks swaying as they waded, hunting intently. It smelled of marsh and the raw tang of the sweet flag and reeds that grew in clumps over the old, sunken peat hollows.

'Beautiful weather, but looks like a heatwave coming,' a woman piped up.

'Good thing there's a cool breeze.'

'Because it's early. It dries things better than the sun.'

'There's not been such a dry summer in a long time!'

They each said in turn before stopping at the raised cabbage strips to work.

'How they've grown – the heads of some are swelling already.'

'So long as they're not eaten by grubs. They might still pounce in this drought.'

'Oh aye. They've stripped 'em bare at Wola.'

'At Modlica they've dried up completely. They had to plant 'em again.'

So they chattered, jabbing at the ground with their mattocks and earthing up the rows that were growing splendidly, though thick with weeds. The dandelions were nigh on knee high, while the kingcups and even the thistles were dense as a forest.

'What you don't want and don't sow grows lushest,' said one of them, shaking off the soil from some weed she'd pulled up.

'Like everything bad! No one seems to sow sin, but the world's full of it.'

'For it's fruitful, m'dears! While there's human beings, there's sin. Why, they do say life would be grim without sin, or if sin were banished, man would long since have vanished! It must have some use, like this weed, since the Lord Jesus created both! Jagustynka held forth in that way of hers.

'The Lord Jesus created evil! As if! Humans are like swine, they have to spoil everything with their greedy snouts!' Hanka declared sternly and they fell silent.

The sun was high now and the mists had vanished completely when other women began to arrive from the village.

'Fine workers! They wait for the dew to dry so's they don't wet their feet,' Hanka mocked.

'Not everyone's so keen on work as you!'

'Because not everyone's got to labour so hard, not everyone!' She sighed heavily.

'Your husband'll be back, then you can rest.'

'I vowed I'd go to Czestochowa for Our Lady of the Angels,² if he only came back. The Voyt promised it'd be today.'

'He'll know from the offices, so must be true. There's quite a few off to Czestochowa this year. Happen the organist's wife is going and she says the parish priest is leading the company!'

'And who's going to carry that belly for 'im?' said Jagustynka with a laugh. 'He won't manage it himself for such a chunk of road. He's always promising.'

'I've been a few times with the others, but I'd go every year if I could,' said Filipka from beyond the pond.

'Everyone's greedy for a spot of idleness.'

'Jesus!' Filipka continued fervently, ignoring the jibes. 'It's like a body's gone to heaven, so light and fine it is along the way. And so much of the world do you see, so much do you hear and do you pray! Only a few weeks, and it seems like you shed years of worry and trouble. Like you were born again!'

'Aye, it's God's mercy that strengthens you! Aye ...' some of the others confirmed.

From the village, by the path along the river, between the reeds and the thick young alders, a girl was hurrying towards them. Hanka shielded her eyes from the sun, but could not make out who it was. Only up closer did she recognize Józka, who was running as fast as she could, shouting from a distance already and waving her arms:

'Hanus! Antek's back! Hanus!'

Hurling down her mattock, Hanka took off like a bird in flight, but then in a flash she recollected herself, letting down her hitched-up woollen skirt, and though she was overcome, though her heart was thumping, though she was short of breath and could hardly speak, she said calmly as though it were nothing:

'Carry on here yourselves, and come to the cottage for breakfast.' She then went off slowly, without haste, questioning Józka about everything.

The women watched after her, utterly confounded by her calmness.

'It's just for people's eyes she's that calm. So they don't poke fun at how keen she is for her man. I wouldn't be able to stand it!' said Jagustynka.

'Nor me! Let's hope Antek don't fancy any more romancin' ...'

'Jagusia's not at hand no more, so maybe he won't feel like it.'

'M'dear! Just the sniff of a skirt, and a man's off and away.'

'Oi true, a beast's less prone to do itself damage than some men ...'

They gossiped away, hardly applying themselves now, while Hanka walked on steadily, stopping almost deliberately to chat with anyone she met, though she was barely conscious of what she said or if they answered, for she had but one thing in her mind, that Antek was back and waiting for her.

'And he came back with Rocho?' She asked the same thing repeatedly.

'With Rocho! Why, I've said so already!'

'And how does he look? How?'

'How do I know? He came and straight on the doorstep he says: "Where's Hanka?" So I told him and dashed off in a flash to get you, and that's it!'

'He asked for me! May the Lord Jesus ... May he ...' She was overwhelmed with happiness.

She spotted him from a distance. He was sitting with Rocho on the porch and, seeing her, he came to meet her in the farmyard.

She went towards him more and more slowly and heavily, catching hold of the fence along the way since her legs were buckling beneath her. She couldn't catch her breath. The tears were choking her and her head was in such confusion that she could barely stammer: 'It's you! It's you!' The rest of her words were smothered in tears and flooded with happiness.

'It's me, Hanus! It's me!' He clasped her close to his breast, hugging her with such affection, with his whole heart. She pressed against him too, forgetting everything. Happy tears streamed down her pale face and her lips trembled as she surrendered herself to his arms with all the longing of an eager child.

She could not speak for some time, for what could she say, how could she tell him everything that was inside her! Why, she could have knelt down before him, she could have swept the dust at his feet, so only a word or two burst free, falling like a shower of grain or a flower fragrant with joy and bedewed with heartfelt blood, and her eyes, loyal and devoted, eyes full of limitless love, lay down at his feet like faithful dogs, bending to his will and favour.

'You've got thin, Hanus!' he whispered, caressing her face tenderly.

'Well ... after all I've suffered, all my waiting ...'

'The woman's worked herself to the bone,' Rocho spoke up.

'You here too! I'd completely forgotten about you!' She began to greet him and kiss his hands, and he meanwhile remarked jokingly:

'Well, that's no wonder. I promised to bring him, and now you have him ...'

'I do! I do!' she cried, standing in sudden amazement in front of Antek. He had grown paler, more delicate-looking, handsome, strong, like a gentleman, like someone quite different. She could not take it in.

'Have I changed, the way you're staring at me?'

'No, but you're kind of all different.'

'Just wait till I get out in the fields to work. I'll soon be like I was before.'

She leapt into the room suddenly for the youngest child.

'You've not seen him yet!' she cried, bringing out the screaming boy. 'Just look, like as two peas in a pod.'

'A strong lad!' He wrapped him in a corner of his capote and rocked him.

'He's called Rocho. Pietruś, come here you, to your father.' She pushed forward the eldest, who began scrambling on to his father's knee, mumbling something. Antek embraced them both with strange tenderness.

'Dear little bugs, bonny little mites! Pietruś has really grown, and he chats away.'

'Aye, and he's that wayward, and that smart. Let him get his hands on a whip and he starts cracking it and chasing the geese.' She crouched down beside them. 'Pietruś, say: "Daddy"! Go on.'

He did indeed mutter something of the sort and babbled even more, pulling his father by the hair.

'Józka, why are you lurking? Come here,' he remarked.

'I daren't,' she squeaked shyly.

'Come here, stupid, come on!' He pulled her close in a tender, brotherly way. 'Now you must mind me in everything, like a father. Don't worry, I shan't be hard on you. You'll meet with no injury from me.'

The poor girl burst into forlorn tears, recalling her father and brother.

'When the Voyt told me of his death, everything went dark like someone had hit me. Such a dear lad, dearest of brothers. Who'd have thought it. I were sorting in my head how we'd divide the land, I were even thinking of a wife for him,' he said quietly, with deepest pain, so that Rocho, to turn aside sad thoughts, rose from his place, calling:

'Talking's all very well, but my guts are playing a march.'

'Heavens, I clean forgot. Józka, go catch the yellow cockerels. *Cip, cip, cip!* But maybe eggs first, eh? Maybe bread? It's fresh and the butter's yesterday's! Chop the heads off and scald 'em with boiling water! I'll soon have 'em ready. What a scatterbrain, to forget!'

'Leave the cockerels for another time, Hanus, and do something homely. I've had enough o' town food – a bowl o' potatoes and borscht is what I fancy.' He laughed merrily. 'Something else for Rocho.'

'God bless. But I fancy just the same!'

Hanka rushed to prepare the food, and since the potatoes were already bubbling in the pan, she simply brought some sausage from the storeroom for the borscht.

'I kept it for you, Jantos. It's from that sow that you said to slaughter just before Easter.'

'Well, well, that's a hefty chunk, but we'll get the better of it, with God's help. But Rocho – where are the gifts?'

The old man pushed forward a sizeable bundle, from which Antek began pulling all kinds of things and handing them out to each one there.

'Here, Hanus, this is for you, should you happen to go on a journey.' He handed her a woollen shawl, exactly like the one the organist's wife had, all black and chequered in red and green.

'For me! Fancy you remembering. Antos,' she stammered with boundless gratitude.

'Ba, if not for Rocho I might have forgot, but he reminded me and we went straight off together to choose and buy.'

And he'd done plenty of buying, since he handed his wife a pair of boots and a silken headscarf, blue with yellow flowers. Józka got one too, only green, and a frilled collar and a few strings of beads with a long ribbon to tie them, and for the children he brought gingerbread and mouth organs. He even had a gift for the blacksmith's wife, for he put something aside wrapped in paper, nor did he forget Witek or the farmhand.

They were exclaiming with astonishment at each new marvel, examining and trying them on with such delight that the tears rolled down Hanka's flushed face and Józka put her hands to her head in amazement.

Rocho was smiling and rubbing his hands and Antek just whistled to himself.

'You've surely earned the gifts. Rocho tells me how nicely everything's going on the farm. Give over, I didn't bring 'em to be thanked,' he called, defending himself, for they had thrown themselves at him, hugging and kissing him.

'I never dreamed of such marvels,' Hanka whispered tearfully, sitting and trying on the boots. 'A bit tight, my feet have swollen with my going barefoot, but they'll be just right in winter.'

Rochko began asking about the village and various matters, but she answered only vaguely, so busy with the food that before long she had placed a large basin of potatoes before them, tossed in lashings of lard, and one no smaller of borscht, in which a ring of sausage swam.

They applied themselves eagerly to breakfast.

'Now this is proper food,' Antek cried merrily. 'The sausage smells grand. A man can feel some weight in his stomach after this. The stuff they fed us in the slammer, devil take 'em.'

'You poor thing, you must've been starving.'

'Aye, and in the end I couldn't eat a thing.'

'The men were saying that only a starving dog would touch the food they gave you – is it true?'

'True, aye, but the worst was being shut up. While it were cold, it were just about bearable, but soon as the sun started to shine and then came the scent of the earth, I thought I'd go mad.

Freedom smelled better to me than sausage. I tried to rip out the grating except they stopped me.'

'Is it true they beat people?' she asked fearfully.

'They do! There are some right bandits in there who should get the stick every day out of pure justice. They didn't dare lay a finger on me. Just let some scum try, I'd give 'em what for, aye!'

'Indeed, who'd get the better of such a beast, who?' she assented happily, gazing at him and mindful of his slightest nod.

Antek and Rochko quickly despatched the meal and went off to sleep in the barn, where Hanka had already carried quilts and pillows to the hayloft.

'Lord have mercy, we'll melt like pork rind,' said Rochko with a laugh.

Hanka did not reply. On closing the doors behind her, she suddenly felt completely overwhelmed and ran off to the garden to weed the parsley. She looked about for a moment and then burst into tears. She cried for joy, she cried because the sun was warming her shoulders, because the green trees were swaying overhead, because the birds were singing, because everything smelled fragrant and was blossoming and because her soul felt so good, so quiet and so blessed, as though after holy confession or even better.

'And all thanks to you, my Jesus!' she murmured, lifting her tearful eyes to heaven, filled with the deepest inexpressible gratitude for the blessing she'd received.

'Everything's different already!' she thought, amazed, glad, in heaven almost, so that the whole time they were sleeping, she walked about dizzy with happiness. She guarded them like a brood hen minding her chicks, taking the children far into the orchard, in case they shouted too loudly, or chasing away all the animals from the yard, oblivious to the pigs rooting in the early potatoes or the chickens scraping at the sprouting cucumbers. She ignored the rest of the world, constantly peering in at the sleepers.

And she could hardly stand the way the day stretched out so tediously. Breakfast went by, then dinner, and still they slept. She packed everybody off to work, not caring about what might be going on in her absence, and just stood sentry, pacing back and forth between house and barn.

A hundred times she took out her gifts to try them on and look and exclaim.

'Was there ever another husband so kind and caring, was there?'

Until at last she rushed off to tell the women in the village and as soon as she spotted anyone, she'd call from a distance:

'You know, my man is back! He's sleeping in the barn right now.'

And her eyes and face were smiling and the whole of her breathed such joy and jubilation that the women marvelled.

'Has that rascal cast a spell on her, or what? She's lost her head.'

'She'll soon go all hoity-toity and nose in the air, just wait and see!'

'Wait till Antek goes back to his old ways, that'll bring her down a peg.'

So they gossiped among themselves.

But she heard none of this tittle-tattle. Rushing back to the cottage, she began quick as a flash to prepare a lavish dinner, but hearing the geese honking at the pond she dashed out to quieten them by lobbing stones, almost provoking an argument with the miller's wife as a result.

Hanka had just sent out a bite for the people in the fields, when the men came in from the barn. She set dinner out in front of the house in the cool and shade, even serving vodka and beer, and to finish she presented half a sieve of well-ripened cherries that she'd fetched from the priest's housekeeper.

'Dinner fit for a wedding,' joked Rochko.

'The master's back, isn't that celebration enough?' she retorted, bustling around them and hardly eating herself.

Afterwards Rochko went straight off to the village, promising to return by evening, and Hanka timidly asked her husband:

'Do you want to look over the farm?'

'Why, yes! Holiday's over, time to get to work! My God, I never expected my birthright to come to me so fast!' He sighed as he followed her. First she led him to the stable, where three horses were snorting, and a foal was wandering about the enclosure; then to the empty byre, and then to the barn to see this year's hay. They even looked at the sties and the shed where all kinds of tools and implements were kept.

'The britchka needs rolling out on to the threshing floor or it'll dry out completely.'

'Didn't I say to Pietrek? He just don't listen to me.'

She began to call the piglets and poultry, boasting of the plentiful livestock, and when he'd seen that too, she told him broadly of the field work, where what had been sown and how much of what where, looking him in the eye keenly as she did so, with expectation. He made a careful note of everything in his mind, asking this and that, until finally he said:

'Hard to believe you managed all this yourself!'

'For you, I'd do even more,' she whispered, overcome with happiness at the praise.

'Bravo, Haniuś, bravo! I'd never have thought it.'

'It were needed, so aye, I got on with it.'

He even looked over the orchard, full of cherries well on their way to ripening, and the rows where onion, parsley and cabbage sets were growing.

They headed back. Passing his father's side of the house, he looked in through the open window.

'But where's Jagna?' His eyes darted about the empty room.

'Where do you think! At her mother's. I threw her out!' she said firmly, looking at him.

Frowning, he deliberated a while and, lighting a cigarette, said calmly, as though indifferent:

'Dominikowa's a vicious dog. She won't let it go without a lawsuit.'

'Seems they went rushing off yesterday to make a complaint to the court.'

'It's a long road from complaint to judgement. But we have to think on it careful-like, so that she don't play us some trick ...'

She recounted how it had all come about and why, though omitting much. He neither interrupted nor questioned her, just frowning and flashing his eyes, until she handed him the settlement, at which he gave a bitter laugh:

'You might as well run round to the back of the barn³ with that for all it's worth.'

'Why, it's the very same that Father gave her.'

'As good as a broken stick! If she'd signed it over at the notary's, it'd mean something. She were having a laugh chucking that down!'

He shrugged, picked up Pietruś and headed towards the stile.

'I'll take a look at the fields and be right back!' he called over his shoulder, so she stayed behind, though she longed to go after him. He gave the hayrick a sidelong glance as he passed, now rebuilt and full of hay.

'Mateusz fixed it. Took three haycocks just for the roof,' she called after him, standing at the stile.

'Good, good,' he muttered, not that interested in every petty thing. He walked past the potatoes and continued along the baulk.

That year it was almost all winter wheat in the fields this side of the village, so Antek met few people along the way and those he did he greeted briefly and passed by quickly. But gradually he slowed down as Pietruś grew heavier. The quiet warm air was strangely draining. He'd stop, crouch down, examining every strip.

'Ho, ho! The quickweed's choking the flax!' he cried, standing by the strips blue with flowers, but thickly strewn with yellow. 'She bought bad seed and didn't winnow it!'

Then he paused by the barley, which was looking feeble and scorched already and barely visible under the thorns, chamomile and sorrel.

'They must have sown on wet! Burrowed into the field like a pig! May your guts twist for the state o' that tilling! The mess the scum's made o' harrowing! Nothing but clods and couch grass.'

Antek spat, incensed, before stepping on to an enormous field of rye, its crisp heavy ears lapping at his feet like a pool of water rippling in the sun. He felt a deep happiness at the sight of it flourishing beautifully, with its thick stalks and ears like whips.

'Growing like a forest! Sown by Father still! Good as the manor's!' He crumbled an ear. The grain was ripe and full, but still soft – in two weeks it would be time to go under the scythe! As long as the hail didn't flatten it.

But he rejoiced and feasted his eyes most on the wheat, for though it grew unevenly, in clumps and hollows, still the huge dense ears were already showing among the dark shining beards.

'It's going to be quite a crop. Needs thinning in parts, it's too lush.⁴ On a slope, but not scorched at all! Pure gold coming!'

He went still further, slowly climbing the gentle slope beyond which reared the wood in a sheer black wall. The village lay behind him as though in the depths, sunk among orchards, while through the gaps between the cottages the pond shimmered like an eye glittering in the sun.

They were cutting clover somewhere by the graveyard and the scythes flashed over the ground like blue lightning. The red of women's skirts caught the light and gaggles of white geese grazed along the narrow strips of fallow land. Beyond the village, people were moving like ants among green fields of potatoes, while higher still, in the boundless distances, loomed other villages, solitary houses, trees hunching over roads and great fields that seemed plunged in simmering blue water.

A deep silence drifted high over the ground. The hot air gleamed almost blindly and gaped in such a swelter that nothing stirred except for the occasional stork flapping past heavily on drooping wings through those trembling white flames, or a breathless crow.

The skylarks were singing invisibly somewhere. The sky arched high, pure and sultry, with only a little white cloud lurking like a lost sheep here and there among those blue fields.

Meanwhile, a hot dry wind gambolled along the ground, careering like a drunk. Sometimes it reared with a whistle, frightening the birds, or lurking somewhere, it erupted suddenly among the crops, swirling, churning and agitating them to the roots before vanishing again, who knows where, while the shaken strips continued to chatter quietly long after, as though complaining of some rascal.

Antek paused by the woods beside a fallow field and again he was cross.

'Still not ploughed! Horses standing idle, dung's drying out in a heap, and he's not a care in the world! May you ...!' He cursed, moving along the edge of the wood to the cross on the poplar road.

He felt tired now. His head was buzzing and the dust was choking him. Sitting down by the cross in the shade of the birch trees, he laid the sleeping Pietruś on his capote and, wiping away the dripping sweat, he gazed at the world, lost in thought.

The sun leaned towards the forest and the first timid shadows emerged from under the trees, creeping towards the crops. The wood was murmuring quietly, the tips of the trees aflame in the sun, while the thick undergrowth of hazels and aspen shivered as though with cold. The woodpeckers hammered doggedly and somewhere in the distance a magpie screeched. Sometimes a bee-eater flitted between the mossy oaks as though someone had tossed a streak of rainbow into the air.

A chill blew from the murky quiet depths, torn here and there by scattered talons of sunlight. The smell of mushrooms, resin and sun-baked swamp wafted through the air.

Suddenly a hawk shot up over the forest, crossed the fields in one direction and then the other before hovering for a moment and plummeting like a thunderbolt into the wheat ...

Antek leapt to the rescue, but it was too late. A cloud of feathers scattered, the bandit escaped, the partridges screeched plaintively and a frightened hare tore off blindly, its tail flashing white.

'How did he spot it! Damn robber!' he whispered, sitting down again. 'Well, even a hawk's got to eat, even the lowliest worm. That's the way the world is ordered!' he ruminated, covering Pietruś's mouth, since the bees were buzzing over him and a shaggy bumblebee was humming persistently close by.

He remembered how only recently he'd been aching for freedom, for these fields; it was a wonder his soul hadn't shrivelled with longing!

'They wore me out, the scum!' he cursed, not moving from the spot, for right before him from the rye came the call of quails, timidly poking out their heads. They hid in a flash as a whole band of sparrows dropped on to the birches, then rolled about in the sand, twittering madly, bickering, fighting and complaining, until suddenly they fell quiet, rooted to the spot as the hawk circled again and so low its shadow flew along the strips.

'He sorted you screechers! It's just the same with people! You'll get further with a threat than a whine,' he reflected.

Wagtails appeared alongside him on the road, shaking their tails and roving so close that, as soon as he moved his hand, they flew off beyond the ditches.

'Silly birds! I all but grabbed one for Pietruś!'

The crows emerged from the forest, marching along the ruts and pecking at whatever they could, but sensing a human being, they ate cautiously, twisting their heads to look and skirting round him, hopping ever nearer and preening themselves with their loathsome thuggish beaks.

'You'll not feed on me,' he threw a clod at them, and they scuttled off quietly as robbers.

Then afterwards, since he was sitting as though turned to stone, gazing at the world and listening with rapt attention to its voices, all kinds of creatures began to descend on him boldly. Ants crawled about his shoulders, butterflies alighted repeatedly on his hair, ladybirds searched for something on his face and fat green caterpillars eagerly scaled his boots. Woodland birds twittered somewhere above his head and a squirrel, wending its way from the wood, cocked its red tail, considering for a second if it should spring on to him. But Antek knew nothing of all this; he'd sunk deep into something that emanated powerfully from these boundless lands, sating his soul with a heady and indescribable sweetness.

It seemed to him that he was sweeping across the wheat with the wind; that he was the gleam on the softest damp green shoots of grass; that he was the stream tumbling over warm sands through meadows heavy with the scent of mown hay. It seemed as though he were flying high overhead with the birds and crying out with boundless strength to the sun, or that he had become as one with the murmur of the fields, the swaying of the woods, the force and drive of everything growing and the whole power of this holy land, giving birth in song and jubilation. And in knowing himself, he knew all other things too, both in what he saw and felt, what he touched and sensed, but also in what was impossible to fathom and which some souls see only at the hour of death. It surges deep inside a human heart, gathering and lifting it in some unforeseen direction, inducing sweet tears, and weighs it down with inconsolable yearning like a stone.

Thoughts passed through him like clouds; before he could grasp one, another succeeded it, new and even more mysterious.

He was awake and yet sleep spilled its poppy seeds into his eyes and led him high up into realms of delight, where he felt as at the moment of Elevation, when the soul is carried aloft and floats, kneeling, transported to angelic gardens, to some heaven and paradise full of happiness.

He was tough, after all, and not easily moved, but in those strange few minutes he was ready to fall to the ground, press his burning lips to it and embrace this whole beloved world.

'It's the air unsettling me!' he defended himself, rubbing his eyes with his fists and frowning, but could he pull himself together, could he quench the bliss that flooded him?

He felt he was on the land again, on his father's and grandfathers' fields, among his own, so it was no wonder that his soul rejoiced and every beat of his heart seemed to announce strongly and joyfully to the whole world:

'See, I'm back! I'm back and I'm staying!'

He braced himself, ready to embark upon this new life, following the path his own father had already taken before him and along which his grandfathers and great-grandfathers had passed. Just like them he squared his shoulders, ready to take on the load of heavy labour and carry it fearlessly and tirelessly, until Pietruś should carry it in turn ...

'That's how it must be! Young after old, son after father, in turn, for ever, while it be your will, merciful Jesus,' he thought gravely.

Resting his heavy head in his hands and bending low, he was assailed by a throng of thoughts and memories, while some stern and reproachful voice, his conscience speaking, began to declare bitter and painful truths. He bowed before it, humbling himself, confessing all his sins and offences ...

It was a hard confession and contrition did not come easily, but he overcame his arrogance, quelled his pride and haughtiness and examined his life with implacable and sober eyes. He surveyed all his dealings through and through, deliberating and judging each matter strictly.

'I was stupid, and that's all there is to it! Things must keep to their proper order in the world! Aye, Father spoke wisely: when everyone's riding in one direction, it goes hard for the one who falls off the cart – he'll go under the wheels! You cannot catch up with the horses on foot! But everyone has to puzzle that out for themselves! It costs many dear!' he thought sadly, a wry smile on his lips.

The clattering of rattles sounded from the wood, and the bellow of passing herds.

He picked up Pietruś and set off along the side of the poplar road, letting the herds coming from the woodland meadows pass by. Glowing red in the sunset, heavy horned heads swayed in the clouds of dust that rose from under their hooves and billowed above the poplars. Clusters of sheep kept coming, rounded up by the dogs, since they were forever darting into the wayside wheat. The pigs squealed under the switch, calves bleated, looking for their lost mothers. A couple of shepherds were on horseback while the rest walked with the flocks, cracking their stockwhips, chatting and shouting if a creature wandered off, until the din echoed all around.

Antek was following behind them all, when Witek spotted him and came running to kiss his hand in greeting.

'I see you've not half grown!' he said to the boy kindly.

'It's true, the trousers I got in autumn only come as far as my knees now.'

'Don't you worry – the mistress'll give you new ones, she will! Have the cows enough to eat?'

'Have they heck. The grass is right burnt out; if the mistress didn't add feed in the byre, they'd not be milking at all. Hand me Pietruś, I'll put 'im on the horse for a bit,' he said.

'Nay, he'll not hold on and end up falling!'

'What, haven't I let 'im ride the colt often enough! I'll be holding 'im after all – the lad's fair squealing to get on a horse.' Witek took him and sat him on some old nag, trailing along with its head down. Seizing its mane with his little hands, Pietruś dug his bare heels into the horse's flanks and shrieked with pleasure.

'What a champion! That's my little lad!' Antek whispered as he turned sharp into the fields and went along the baulks, heading for the track that ran behind the barns.

The sun had just gone down and the whole sky glimmered with gold and the palest of green. The wind had dropped and the wheat hung its weighty ears. Distant singing and the noise of the village flew over the emerging dew.

He went along slowly, as though weighed down with memories, for Jagusia now came to his mind. Again and again he saw her blue eyes before him and her gleaming teeth and those full red lips, which seemed to breathe so close to him he'd stop and shudder. There she stood as though before him in the living flesh. He rubbed his eyes, chasing her from his memory, but she continued alongside as though deliberately, hip to hip as once before and, as before, a pleasurable heat seemed to radiate from her until the blood throbbed in his head.

'Maybe it's good Hanka drove her out of the house! It were like a splinter stuck in my side, a painful splinter. But what's gone is gone.' He sighed with a strangely sinking heart. 'It's done.' And straightening up, he rebuked himself: 'That's an end to the wild oats!'

He entered the farmstead. Outside, it was noisy and crowded; they were all busy with the evening chores. Józka was milking the cows by the byre, squawking a shrill tune, and Hanka was kneading dumplings on the porch.

Antek said something to Pietrek, who was watering the horse, and went to look at his father's side of the house. Hanka flew in after him.

'We must clean up and move in here. Is there lime?' asked Antek.

'I bought some back at the fair. I'll call on Stacho tomorrow and he can whitewash it. Aye, it'll be more convenient for us on this side,' Hanka replied.

He pondered, checking every corner.

'Were you in the fields?' she asked timidly.

'I was. All's well, Hanuś. Couldn't have done better myself.'

She reddened greatly, pleased at the praise.

'But Pietrek's good for minding pigs, not working the land! The sluggard!'
'Don't I know! I've even asked about for a new farmhand.'
'I'll take him in hand, and if he don't listen, he'll be out on his ear!'
She had something more to say, but the children began shouting and she rushed to them. Antek headed outside, checking over everything so carefully and so sternly that, though he barely said a word, Pietrek's skin crawled, while Witek, anxious to be out of sight, kept his distance and skulked along the edges of the farmstead.
Józka was now milking her third cow and singing ever louder:

*'Pretty grey, stand still!
I've got a pail to fill!'*

'You're yelling like you're being skinned alive!' Antek shouted to her.
She broke off suddenly, but being bold and stubborn, she began again, only a bit quieter and more timidly:

*'To beg you, Mother sent me,
To give us milk aplenty;
Pretty grey, stand still!'*

'Shut up, can't you, when Master's home!' Hanka scolded, hoisting a drink for the last cow. 'You'll mind him soon enough,' she added.
Antek took the pail from her and, setting it before the cow, said, laughing:
'Screech away, Józka. The rats'll leave the house faster ...'
'I'll do as I like!' she snapped, impertinent and pugnacious, but as soon as they'd gone she stopped at once, frowning after her brother, nose in the air.
Hanka now busied herself with the pigs, lugging heavy pails of swill so briskly that Antek felt sorry for her and said:
'Let the boys do it, I can see it's too heavy for you! Just wait, I'll find a lass for you, for Jagustynka's as much help as a dog's tears. Where's she got to today?'
'Rushed off to her children, making peace with them! A lass, aye, that'd be handy, but such a cost. I can manage myself, but if you say so ... as you wish ...' She all but kissed his hand out of gratitude, then added gleefully: 'And we could raise more goslings and have a second porker to sell!'
'We're farmers and must do what's fit on the farm, as it's always been and our fathers have done!' he said, after long deliberation.
After supper he went out in front of the cottage where his friends and cronies were gathering. They all greeted him, pleased at his return.
Mateusz came with Grzela, the Voyt's brother, along with Stacho Płoszka, Kłab and his son, cousin Adam and others.
'We were looking out for you like kites for rain!' said Grzela.
'Well, they held on to me like wolves. No way to break free!'
They sat on the earth bench in the shade. Only Rocho sat under the window in the lamplight, which poured out in a broad sweep as far as the orchard.
It was a quiet evening, warm and bright with stars. The little lights of cottages flickered through the trees, the pond murmured occasionally as though sighing, and everywhere people were cooling off beside cottage walls.

Antek was asking all manner of questions when Rocho interrupted him:
'You know, the prefect⁵ said that in two weeks' time Lipce folk are to gather and approve a school!'
'What's that to us, let our fathers consult!' Płoszka retorted, but Grzela chided him:
'Easy to push it on to our fathers and laze around ourselves, belly to the sky! That's why the village is in this state, because none of the young 'uns want to worry their heads over anything.'
'If they sign over some land, then I'll start bothering.'
They began to squabble sharply over it, until Antek put in:
'Too bad, Lipce needs a school, but we shouldn't approve a grosz for any school of the prefect's.'
Rocho supported him, cautioning them and urging them to resist.
'Approve a zloty each, and then it'll turn into a rouble ... and what happened with the resolution for a courthouse, eh? They got well fat on our money. Not bad bellies they've grown!'
'I'm for the community not approving,' whispered Grzela, who had sat down by Rocho. The latter had taken Grzela to one side and was handing him some pamphlets and little books on the quiet and instructing him gravely about something.
The others talked of this and that, but sleepily now and with no great enthusiasm. Even Mateusz was sad and said little today, though he kept a watchful eye on Antek.
They were about to disperse, for they had to be up at daybreak for work, when the blacksmith rushed in, complaining that he'd only just returned from the manor, and began cursing the village and everyone in it.

'What's bitten you now?' asked Hanka, looking out of the window.
'What? I'm ashamed to say, but our men are nothing but asses! The squire treats 'em like people, like farmers, and they're behaving like gooseherds! Aye, seems they're all ready to make an agreement with the squire, they're all for the same thing, but when it comes to signing, one's scratching his head muttering, "Well, I don't know!", next one says, "I'll just talk to the wife" and the third one starts whining that he just wants that meadow alongside thrown in. You try doing something with that sort. The squire got so cross, he wants to hear no more of an agreement, and even ordered that no Lipce cattle were to graze on the woodland pastures, and if anyone lets 'em loose there, they'll be confiscated.'
They were dismayed by this unexpected news, cursing the guilty and arguing among themselves with growing vehemence, when Mateusz spoke up dolefully:
'It's all on account of the people being confused and stupid as a sheep, and there is no one to bring them to reason!'
'How much more explaining can Michał do?'
'Never mind Michał! He's chasing his own profit and is hand in glove with the manor, so folk aren't going to trust him. They'll listen, but they shan't follow ...'
The blacksmith leapt up, heatedly declaring that he had only the good of the village at heart, and had put himself out for the sake of gaining agreement.
'You can swear in church, they won't believe you,' muttered Mateusz.
'Let someone else try, then, and we'll see who manages!' he cried.
'For sure, someone else must do it.'
'But who? The priest maybe, or the miller?' rose sneering voices.
'Who? Antek Boryna! And if he can't bring the village to its senses, then you might as well wash your hands of the whole business ...' said Mateusz.
'Who, me? Who'll listen to me, eh?' Antek stammered, confused.
'You've good sense, you're first in the village, everyone'll listen to you.'
'True! Aye! You're the only one! We'll follow you!' they said eagerly, but this did not suit the blacksmith for some reason, for he paced about uneasily, plucking at his moustache, and laughed scathingly when Antek said:

'Well, nothing ventured nothing gained. I can but try. We'll talk on it soon.'
They began to disperse, but each one separately took him aside to persuade him, promising to follow him, while Kłab said to him:
'The people must always be taken in charge by someone with wits and a strong arm, and who's honest with it.'
'And who can rattle their ribs with a stick if it comes to it!' Mateusz said with a laugh.
They parted and only Antek and the blacksmith were left by the window, for Rocho was kneeling on the porch, deep in his prayers.
They deliberated a long time in the deep silence. Only Hanka could be heard bustling about the chamber. She shook out the bedding, putting on clean bedlinen, and then she washed a long time as though before a great holiday, and brushed her hair by the window, peering out at them with increasing impatience. She pricked up her ears when the blacksmith began quietly dissuading Antek, telling him to drop the whole business since he'd never get all the peasants to agree, and in any case the squire was against him.
'That's not true! He vouched for him at court!' she threw in from the window.
'Since you know best, let's talk of something else ...' He was rabid as a dog.
Antek got up, stretching sleepily.
'I'll say one last thing: they've let you go free until the case is heard, true? How do you think that will go if you get mixed up in someone else's business?'
Antek dropped back on to the bench and fell into such deep thought that the smith, not waiting for a reply, went off home.
Hanka fidgeted by the window, looking out at him again and again, but he did not hear. In the end, she piped up timidly and pleadingly:
'Come, Jantoś, time for bed ... You've laboured plenty today ...'
'Coming, Hanuś, I'm coming ...' He got up heavily.
She began to undress, whispering prayers with trembling lips.
'And if they send me to Siberia, what then?' he thought in dismay as he came inside.

CHAPTER 5

'Pietrek, fetch us some logs,' Hanka shouted from the house. She was all unkempt and covered in flour from making bread.

A fierce fire was crackling in the *szabaśnik* already. She raked it again and again and ran to shape the loaves and carry them out to the porch on a board to place in the sun so they'd rise more quickly. She darted about hurriedly as the next lot of dough was all but surging out of the great trough, covered with a quilt.

'Józka, chuck some more wood on the fire – the oven still looks too black!'

But Józka wasn't there and Pietrek was in no hurry to do her bidding. He was loading dung in the yard, heaping it high on the cart and patting it down so it wouldn't be shaken loose along the road, while chatting in a leisurely way with the blind beggar, who was twisting rope by the barn.

The afternoon sun was scorching still and the walls were shedding resin. The earth was scalding hot, and the air was roasting like fire, making it hard even to move. Flies swarmed, buzzing, over the cart and it was a wonder the horses didn't snap their bridles or break their legs as they tugged, trying to stop them biting.

A sleepy heavy swelter hung over the yard, shot through with the acrid smell of dung. Even the birds in the orchard had fallen silent. The hens lay as though lifeless under the fences, and the piglets squealed as they wallowed in the mud by the well, when suddenly the beggar began sneezing hard at the smell wafting even more pungently from the byre.

'Bless you, Granddad!'

'It's not incense, is it, no, and though I'm used to it, it tickles my nostrils worse than baccy.'

'You like what you're used to!'

'Fool, do I travel the world sniffing dung!'

'I just said it cause it reminded me of what my chief said in the army, when he smacked me on the gob when I were first learning ...'

'And you got used to it, did you? He! He! He!'

'As if. No way, soon got tired of that teaching, so I nabbed the scum in some corner and fixed his face till it swelled like a pumpkin. Didn't hit me after that ...'

'Did you serve long?'

'A whole five year! Had nothing to pay my way out, so I had to shoulder arms. Anyone could shove me around at first, when I were still green. I had my share of hardship, but my mates taught me to pilfer what was lacking. There was one lass gave us stuff, cause I promised to marry her! And the way they called me *kartoshka*¹ and made fun o' my talk and our prayers ...'

'Pagan scum, laughing at prayers.'

'I rattled all their ribs and they gave it a rest!'

'Well, you're a strong 'un!'

'Strong or not, I can take on three!' he boasted with a laugh.

'You went to war, then, did you?'

'O' course, with the Turks.² We totally fixed 'em!'

'Pietrek, where's that wood?' Hanka called again.

'Where it were before!' he retorted under his breath.

'Mistress is calling you,' the beggar prompted him.

'Let her. She'll have me washing the dishes next!'

'You deaf, or what?' she yelled, running out in front of the house.

'I'm not lighting stoves. That's not what I was taken on for!' he yelled back.

She gave him a mouthful of her own. But the farmhand barked back bold as brass, with no intention of obeying, and when she made some sharper riposte, he slammed the pitchfork in the dung and cried angrily:

'I'm not Jagusia! You'll not chase me off with your shouting.'

'Just wait and see what I'll do! Wait and see!' she threatened, touched to the quick and so infuriated now, busy with the bread, that a cloud of flour filled the chamber and puffed through the windows. She kept muttering at the cheek of him as she carried the dough on to the porch, threw logs into the stove or watched the children. She was exhausted from the work and swelter, for the heat in the chamber was choking. She could barely catch her breath in the hallway, which was throbbing from the heat of the *szabaśnik*, and what with the flies swarming on the walls, buzzing ceaselessly, and their bothersome stinging, she was almost in tears, chasing them off with a branch, and was so sweaty and aggravated that she worked more and more slowly and impatiently.

She'd just kneaded the last portion of dough when Pietrek set off from the yard.

'Wait, I'll give you a bite!'

'Prrrr!³ I will have sommat, my stomach's proper rumbling after dinner.'

'Weren't enough for you?'

'Eh ... it were pretty poor stuff, food that flies through your belly like a sieve.'

'Poor! Hark at him! I'm to give you meat, am I! I don't scoff sausage in corners myself either. Others don't have even this much at preharvest. Just look at how the hired hands live.'

She brought a bowl of soured milk and a loaf to the porch.

He sat down greedily to eat and gorged slowly, tossing the odd chunk to the stork, which had come scrambling from the orchard and was stalking him like a dog.

'It's thin stuff, nobbut whey,' he muttered, having eaten some.

'It's soured cream you want is it, wait on.'

When he was quite full and taking up the reins again, she added snidely:

'Go work at Jagusia's. She'll feed you richer food.'

'For sure, no one were dying of hunger when she were mistress here.' Flicking the horse with a whip, he put his shoulder to the wagon and set off. He'd hit a sore spot, but before she'd roused herself to reply, he had left.

The swallows twittered under the thatch and a flock of pigeons fell cooing upon the porch. While she was chasing them off, she heard a grunt from the orchard and was suddenly alarmed lest the pigs were digging up the onions, but luckily it was only the neighbour's sow rooting at the fence.

'Just you poke your snout in, and I'll fix you.'

She'd barely taken up her work again when the stork sprang on to the porch, lingered a moment and, checking with one eye and then the other, began pecking at the loaves, swallowing the dough in great chunks.

She fell upon him with a yell. He fled with beak outstretched, violently working his throat. Just as she was catching up to smack him with a piece of wood, he took off and flew on to the roof of the barn, where he stood for a long time, clattering and rubbing his beak against the ridge.

'Just wait, you thief, I'll break your legs yet,' she threatened as she shaped the pecked loaves again.

Józka came rushing in, so Hanka took it all out on her.

'Where have you been gallivanting! Forever chasing about like a cat with a pig's bladder. I'll tell Antek just how hard-working you are! Get raking the stove, and look lively!'

'I was just at the Płoszkas' to see their Kasia. Everyone's in the field and there's no one even to fetch water for the poor thing.'

'What's up with her – is she ill?'

'Must be the pox, she's burning up like a fire.'

'You bring sickness here and I'll hand you over to the hospital.'

'Like that's the first sick person I've ever sat with! Don't you recall how I looked after you when you were lying in.' And on she prattled in that way of hers, shooing the flies from the dough and raking the coals from the stove.

'It's time to take people a bite,' Hanka interrupted.

'I'll be right off. Should I fry eggs for Antek?'

'Go ahead, but don't squander the pork fat.'

'Do you begrudge it?'

'As if. But it's fatty, it might be bad for him.'

The girl wanted to be away, so she was done with her work in a flash and before Hanka had a chance to seal the stove,⁴ she'd taken three double pots of milk and bread in her apron and run off.

'Take a look at the linen to see if it's dried and wet it again. It can still dry before sunset,' she called out of the window, but Józka was beyond the stile already. Just the tail-end of her song floated in the wake of her flaxen head as it bobbed among the rye.

The hired hands were tossing the dung that Pietrek had carted on to the fields by the woods and Antek was ploughing it in. Despite its recent harrowing, the clay earth was baked hard. The clods cracked like rocks and the horses were pulling the plough so strenuously they nigh on snapped their bridles.

Antek, his hands almost grown into the plough handles and oblivious to the whole world, flicked his whip across the horses' behinds occasionally, but more often clicked his tongue to encourage them, as the work was hard and toilsome and they were almost tired out. He guided the plough with a firm and sensitive hand and sliced through clod after clod, laying wide straight furrows, for the land was to be sown with wheat.

Crows climbed over the ridges, pecking for worms, and the bay colt nibbling the grass along the baulk tugged to get at the mare, greedily reaching for its mother's udder.

'Hark at him, remembering the teat,' muttered Antek, flicking the colt's legs so that he lifted his tail and jumped to the side. He ploughed on patiently, breaking the blistering silence only to toss a word to the women, but he was so exhausted by the work and parching heat that as soon as Pietrek drove up, he shouted angrily:

'The women are waiting and you're dallying like a rag-picker!'

'Why, the road's hard and the horse can barely lift its legs.'

'Why wait so long by the woods, then? I saw you.'

'Go see – I don't scrape sand over it like a cat.'

'Got a mouth on him, the scum,' Antek muttered to himself. 'Gee up, old lady!'

But the horses were growing more and more tired, and they were covered in foam. The sweat was pouring down his face too, though he was stripped down to white trousers and shirt,⁵ and his hands were weary with work, so that seeing Józka he called out merrily:

'Just in time. We're on our last legs.'

He finished the ridge as far as the woods, unharnessed the horses, took off their bridles and let them loose on the grassy woodland road before throwing himself down in the shade at the edge of the wood to eat from the double pots while Józka twittered away in his ears.

'Leave off, I've no interest in your gossip,' he growled crossly, so that she snapped back at him and ran off to look for berries.

The wood was quiet, warm and fragrant and a little misty in the deluge of sunlight. The hushed green undergrowth stirred gently from time to time and from its depths came gusts rich with resin, or snatches of birdsong and stray voices.

Antek stretched out on the grass and puffed on a cigarette. Through the thickening mist he could see the squire, trotting on horseback over the Podlesie fields, and some people with poles. Great firs with trunks like beaten copper soared above him, casting a wavering and soporific shadow across his eyes. If not for the rattle of a cart, he would have sunk completely into the silence.

'The organist's farmhand is off to the sawmill, aye,' he thought, lifting his heavy head and then falling back again, but just as he was dropping off, someone hailed him with a 'Praised be!'

The hired hands were emerging from the forest, one after another, bundles of wood on their backs, and at the end trailed Jagustynka, bent almost to the ground under the weight.

'Take a rest – your eyes are almost on stalks.'

She sat down alongside, leaning her burden against a tree and barely gasping.

'That's not work for you,' he whispered with sympathy.

'Aye, all my strength's fair gone.'

'Pietrek! Closer together with the heaps!' he shouted to the farmhand. 'Why don't your lot help you out?'

She only grimaced, turning away her pained, reddened eyes.

'You've softened so as I hardly recognize you.'

'Even flint gives way to the hammer,' she groaned, hanging her head. 'Poverty'll devour a body faster than rust eats iron.'

'It's a hard preharvest this year, even for the farmers.'

'Whoever's got wild spinach with bran, he don't need to talk of poverty.'

'Good heavens. Come by this evening and we'll find a bushel of potatoes for you. You can work it off at harvest.'

She burst into doleful tears, unable to choke out a word of thanks.

'Maybe Hanka'll find something more,' he added kindly.

'If it weren't for Hanka, you'd all have starved,' she whispered tearfully. 'Aye, I'll work it off, whenever it's needed. And I don't speak for myself. God bless you! What am I, but a scrap o' rubbish that a clog steps on without even knowing it, and well used to hunger, but when my little mites are squealing, "Granny, we're hungry!" and there's nothing to fill their bellies, then I tell you, I'd chop off these pins or steal from the altar and take it to the Jew just so's they could eat.'

'You're back with your children?'

'I'm a mother, after all. Will I leave 'em alone in such misery! And this year it's as though everything ill befell 'em. Their cow fell sick, the potatoes rotted and had to be bought in for planting, the wind brought down the byre, and what's more the son's wife is forever sickening after her last birth and everything's left to God's Providence.'

'Aye, for only vodka smells good to Wojtek and he's keen for the inn.'

'He used to drink out o' misery, pure misery, but since he got work in the wood, he never looks in on the Jew – others'll tell you the same,' she defended her son heatedly. 'Folk count every glass when it's a poor man drinking! Indulged his whims, little Jesus did, to take against one stupid peasant so. And for what? What did he do that were so bad?' she muttered, lifting baleful questioning eyes to the sky.

'Have you not cursed 'em enough?' Antek said pointedly.

'Ha, as if Jesus'd listen to my stupid yapping! Aye, but when a mother curses her children,' she added a little fearfully and anxiously, 'in her heart she don't wish no wrong. A wrathful tongue don't fast. Aye ...'

'Has Wojtek let the meadow go, eh?'

'The miller brought him a whole thousand zloty for it, but I forbad it, for if it falls into the claws of a wolf like that, then the devil himself won't tear it free. And maybe someone else with money will turn up?'

'Beautiful meadow, two scythings a year no bother. If I had some spare cash!' He sighed, licking his lips like a cat at the milk.

'Maciej wanted to buy it too, as it's right next to Jagusia's fields.'

He shuddered at the name, but left it the space of a Hail Mary before he asked, as though indifferently, casting his eyes far over the fields:

'What's up at Dominikowa's?'

But she saw straight through him, and a smile flitted over her withered lips. Her eyes brightened and, shifting closer, she began sorrowfully to recount:

'What indeed! Hell, that's what. It's like after a burial in that house, fair frozen with grief, and no joy nor help from anywhere! It's all weeping and waiting on God's mercy! And Jagusia most of all ...'

And she spun all manner of tales, like yarn, about Jagusia's sadness, griefs and abandonment. She spoke heatedly, flattering him, pulling at his tongue a little. He remained stubbornly silent, when suddenly such an agony rocked him that he trembled all over.

It was lucky that Józka returned just then, carrying half an apron of berries. She tipped some into his hat and, gathering up the double pots, galloped off home.

Jagustynka, having failed to get a word out of him in reply, began to heave herself up with a groan.

'Give over! Pietrek, take her on the cart!' he ordered curtly.

He caught hold of the plough and for some time patiently cut through the parched hard ground, bending under the yoke like an ox, throwing himself completely into the work, but even so he could not stifle the longing.

The day seemed to stretch, so that more than once he glanced at the sun and measured the field with impatient eyes; there was a fair chunk still to be ploughed. He grew more and more irritated and lay into the horses for no reason, shouting sharply at the women to get a move on. Something was enraging him so that he could hardly bear it, and such thoughts tumbled around his head and darkened his eyes that the plough wobbled more and more in his hands, catching against stones, then near the wood it sank under some root so badly the ploughshare was torn off.

There was no way to carry on, so he put the plough on the skids,⁶ and, harnessing the gelding, set off to fetch another.

Inside the house it was empty and everything lay in a muddle and floury mess. Meanwhile, Hanka was quarrelling with someone in the orchard.

'Sluggard! Got time for squabbling!' he muttered, going out in the yard, but there he grew even crosser, for the second plough that he'd pulled out from the shed was equally useless. He fiddled with it for a long time with growing impatience, listening to the quarrel, for Hanka was now yelling, thoroughly incensed:

'Pay for the damage, and I'll let the sow out, and if not I'll take you to court! You can pay for the linen it tore down back in spring when it were bleaching, and for those potatoes it's rooted out. And I've witnesses to all of it! Hark at her, the know-all, grazing her pigs on my land! I'll not let it pass! And next time I'll break your sow's legs and yours as well!' she yelled, thoroughly enraged. Since her neighbour gave as good as she got, they were at it hammer and tongs, shaking their clenched fists at each other across the fence.

'Hanka!' he shouted, hoisting the plough on to his shoulder.

She came running, all worked up and ruffled as a hen.

'You're bawling so's the whole village can hear!'

'I'm standing up for what's mine! What, am I to let other people's pigs root in my patch! Am I to be quiet when they do that much damage? No way, I'll not let it go!' she yelled until he stopped her short:

'Pull yourself together. You look like nothing on earth!'

'Ha, I'm to dress up for work like I'm off to church, indeed.'

He glanced at her disdainfully, for she looked as though someone had dragged her from under a bed, and shrugging, he left.

The blacksmith was at work. The powerful sound of hammers could be heard from a distance, and in the smithy the fire was roaring and it was hot as hell. Michał and his assistant were just forging some thick bars. The sweat was flooding his grimy face, but he hammered strenuously, almost ferociously.

'Who's after such solid axles?'

'Płoszka for his wagon! Carting timber for the sawmill!'

Antek sat down on the threshold and rolled a cigarette.

The hammers beat away relentlessly, striking constantly, one two, one two, and the red-hot iron slowly became soft as dough under the force of the blows, moulded to their needs, until the whole smithy shook.

'Wouldn't you like to do some carting?' said Michał, placing the iron in the fire and working the bellows.

'Like the miller'd let me. I hear he's carting along with the organist and hand in glove with the Jews.'

'You've horses and gear all ready, and a farmhand who just hangs about the house. Pay's not bad,' he murmured encouragingly.

'Aye, money'd be useful for harvest-time, but miller's not going to be asking for help.'

'You need to talk with the dealers.'

'Like I know 'em! If you wanted to put in a word!'

'Since you ask, I will. I can nip over today, even.'

Antek quickly left the forge since the hammers were off again and sparks showered in a fiery scorching rain.

'I'll be right back. I'll just see what sort o' timber they're bringing.'

The mill was humming like a hive. The trimmers were working without pause, the saws devouring the long logs with a dull scraping and the water tumbling with a roar from under the wheels into the river where, foaming and agitated, it bubbled and babbled against the narrow banks. Pines barely stripped of their branches were toppling from carts until the ground groaned beneath them, while six men were squaring and bevelling them and others carrying planks out into the sun.

Mateusz was directing the whole plant, every moment in a different place, darting about valiantly, organizing and supervising everything intently. They hailed each other with a friendly greeting.

'Where's Bartek, then?' asked Antek, looking about the workers.

'Got tired of Lipce and followed the wind.'

'Some always have a yen to ramble about the world! I see you've work for some time to come, that much wood!'

'Enough for a year, maybe more. If the squire comes to an agreement with everyone, he'll cut down half the wood and sell it.'

'They're measuring land out again at Podlesie today.'

'Because every day someone's applying for an agreement! That lot are like sheep, they didn't want to listen and come as a band, get the squire to give more, and now they're going one at a time, on the sly, just so as it's quick.'

'Some are like that ass: if you want it to go forward, pull its tail! Sheep they are, for sure. The squire's ripping off each one, since they're coming separate to agree.'

'Have you taken your portion?'

'It's not yet time after Father's death and we're waiting to do the divisions, but I've got my eye on some fields.'

Beyond the river a face flashed among the alders. It looked like Jagusia, and though Antek was chatting, his eyes began darting more and more restlessly towards the riverside thickets.

'This heat – I need a dip,' he said eventually and went down to the river as though looking for a good spot. But as soon as the trees hid him, he raced along. It was her, sure enough. She was heading for the cabbages with a hoe.

'Jagusia!' he called, drawing level with her.

She looked about carefully, and recognizing the voice and his face leaning out of the reeds, she stopped fearfully, not knowing at all what to do, completely helpless and frightened.

'Don't you recognize me, then?' he whispered ardently, trying to cross to the other side to reach her. But the river was deep at that point, though only a few paces wide.

'How would I not recognize you? She looked nervously about at the cabbage field, where the skirts of women flashed red.

'Where've you been hiding that you're nowhere to be seen?'

'Where? Your wife chased me out the house, so I'm at my mother's ...'

'I'd be glad to talk to you about that. Come out to the graveyard, Jagna, this evening. I've got something to tell you. Come!' he begged fervently.

'Ha, so that someone sees me! I've had enough o' that ...' she retorted firmly. But he so badgered her and pleaded that her heart melted, and she started to feel sorry for him.

'What news can you have to tell? What are you calling me for?'

'Am I a complete stranger to you then, Jaguś?'

'No stranger, but not mine neither! I've not got such things on my mind ...'

'Just come, you won't regret it. If you're scared to come to the graveyard, come behind the priest's orchard – you remember where, don't you? Don't you remember, Jaguś?'

She flushed so crimson that she had to turn her head away.

'Stop it, aye, I'm ashamed ...' she was greatly embarrassed.

'Come, Jaguś, I'll wait, even till midnight ...'

'Wait, then ...' She turned away suddenly and rushed off to the cabbage fields.

He looked after her greedily, with such relish, so inflamed, that he was ready to rush after her and take her right in front of everyone ... He could barely restrain himself.

'The heat's uninged me, that's what it is!' he thought, undressing hurriedly to bathe.

He cooled down nicely and began to think on himself.

'A man's feeble as shives. Any old thing'll carry him off ...'

Feeling ashamed, he looked about to see if anyone had seen him with her, and began earnestly weighing up all he'd been told about her.

'So that's how you are, my little Jagna, that's how it is!' he thought with contempt and yet with regret, until suddenly he stopped under some tree and stood there, eyes closed, for she'd appeared in his mind's eye in all her wonder.

'Can't be another like her in the whole world!' he moaned and longed terribly to see her just one more time, to take her in his arms, press her to his heart one more time and drink from those red lips, drink that sweet honey until he was in a stupor, drink to the dregs ...

'Just this one last time, Jagusia! This one last!' he whispered beseechingly as though to her. Then he rubbed his eyes for a long time, looking around at the trees, before he pulled himself

together and went to the smithy. Michał was there by himself and had started on the plough.

'Will your cart take such loads?' he asked.

'If I had anything to cart ...'

'Since I'm promising, it's as good as on your cart.'

Antek began marking with chalk on the doors of the smithy and calculating.

'I could earn another three hundred zloty before harvest!' he declared joyfully.

'Just enough to cover the cost of your case,' replied the smith casually.

Antek suddenly frowned, his eyes clouding over.

'It's a nightmare, that case of mine. Soon as I think of it, everything falls from my hands. I lose the will to live ...'

'No surprise. I just wonder why you're not yet looking for some escape.'

'What could I do?'

'But something's got to be done! What, go under the knife like a calf at the butcher's to be castrated?'

'Can't knock through a wall with my head!' he said, sighing painfully.

Michał resumed his vehement hammering, while Antek sank into anxious and terrified musings, assailed by such thoughts that his expression changed and he leapt from his place, his eyes darting helplessly about. His brother-in-law left him to his torments, observing him at length with cunning eyes, until eventually he said quietly:

'Kazimierz from Modlica knew what to do ...'

'That one who ran off to America?'

'The very same! A right smart alec, he read the writing on the wall.'

'Didn't they prove he'd killed that guard?'

'He didn't wait for them to prove it! He's not stupid enough to rot in the slammer ...'

'Easy for him, a bachelor.'

'He saves himself who must. I'm not urging anything on you, in case you think I've my own ends in mind. I'm just saying what others've done. Do whatever you like. Wojtek Gajda from Wolica came back from the slammer at Easter too. Well, ten years, it's not a whole life, you can get through ...'

'Ten years, dear Jesus!' Antek groaned, slapping his head.

'And much of that in hard labour – aye, it's a fair chunk of time.'

'I'll put up with anything but that. Jesus! I were only in a few months and nearly went mad ...'

'And in three weeks you'd be over the sea. Jankiel! I'll tell you ...'

'It's shocking far away! How can a man leave, chuck everything aside, quit home, children, land, village, out into the world, for ever!' He was seized with dread.

'Many have gone willingly and have no mind at all to return to this paradise.'

'Well, it's a horror for me to think of it!'

'For sure, but take a look at Wojtek and listen to what he has to say about the slammer, and that'll worry you even more! Why, the man's not yet forty and he's gone grey completely, hunched over, spits pure blood and can barely drag his pins. Matter of time before he's in the priest's byre. But you don't need telling, you've sense enough, so listen to him.'

He fell silent in good time, marking that he'd sown anxiety, and so the rest he left to do its work, secretly pleased at the fine crop that he hoped to reap. Having finished the plough, he piped up cheerfully:

'I'll be off now to the dealers, and you set the cart ready for tomorrow, for you'll be on the job. Don't think of the case, it's not worth the trouble. What will be will be, and what the merciful God permits. I'll come by this evening.'

But Antek did not forget so quickly; he swallowed these friendly tales like a fish the bait and choked on it. It turned his liver so that he could barely move in the torment of these horrifying notions.

'Ten years! Ten years!' he kept whispering, numb with terror.

Dusk was falling already, people were coming down from the fields, and there was quite a commotion in the farmyard after Witek had driven back the herd. The women were bustling about with the milking and chores, and the village fair shook with the clatter of early evening and the cries of children bathing in the pond.

Antek pulled the wagon out from behind the barn to get it sorted and ready for the next day, but suddenly he didn't feel like doing it any more and just shouted to Pietrek, who was watering the horse at the well:

'Grease the wagon and bring it out. From tomorrow you'll be carting for the mill.'

The farmhand cursed roundly. The work was not to his taste.

'Shut your mouth and do as you're told! Hanuś, give the horses three measures of oats for fodder, and Pietrek, bring some clover from the field. Let 'em have a good feed ...'

Hanka tried to question him but he just muttered something in reply, and after milling about the yard a while, he went off to see Mateusz, with whom he was now great friends.

Mateusz was only just back from work and slurping soured milk in front of the house to cool down. Somewhere from the orchard, the sound of quiet sad weeping reached them.

'Who's that screeching?' asked Antek.

'Eh, it's Nastusia. Nothing but trouble with these romancings: the banns have been read, the wedding's on Sunday, and yesterday Dominikowa announced through the Soltys that the farm's written over to her and she won't give Szymek a single strip and won't let him into the house. And she'll do it too, no doubt of it. I know that old dog-in-the-manger all too well.'

'What's Szymek say?'

'Well, what can he say? He's been sitting in that orchard like a stump since he arrived this morning. Doesn't answer Nastusia. I'm even feared he's lost his mind.'

'Szymek!' he shouted towards the orchard. 'Come on over; Boryna's here, maybe he can help you ...'

He appeared in a minute or so and sat down on the earth bench without a word of greeting for anyone. Aye, the boy looked completely drained and dry as an aspen plank, though his eyes were burning and some grim resolution lurked in his gaunt face.

'What are you thinking?' Mateusz asked gently.

'What? That I'll get an axe and finish her off like a dog!'

'Idiot! Leave your tales for the inn.'

'As God's in heaven, I'll kill her. What's left for me, what? She's denying me the land from my father, chases me out the house, won't give a settlement, so what'll I do? Where'll I go, a poor wretch, where? That my born mother should wrong me like this!' he moaned, wiping his tears with his sleeve. Suddenly he leapt up and shouted: 'I won't give up what's mine, son-of-a-bitch, even if I have to rot in the slammer, I will not!'

They calmed him down inasmuch as he fell silent and sat gloomily and bristling, not responding even to Nastusia's tearful whispers. They deliberated meanwhile how to help him, but to what end when they could come up with nothing, as there was no way to deal with Dominikowa? Finally, Nastka pulled her brother aside and began proposing something to him.

'A woman and she's come up with a clever solution!' he cried joyfully as he returned to the cottage. 'She says to buy six morgen from the squire at Podlesie and pay by instalments! Well, isn't it a good plan? And your mother can kiss your you know what, let her go mad with rage ...'

'The plan's as good as any, but where's the money for it?'

'Nastusia has a thousand zlotys, that's enough to put down ...'

'And where's the cottage, the livestock, the tools, the seeds?'

'Where? Why here! And here!' yelled Szymek suddenly, jumping up in front of them and shaking his clenched fists ...

'Easy to say, but can you manage?' muttered Antek with disbelief.

'Just give me some land, and you'll see, just give it me!' he cried forcefully.

'Then there's no time for brooding. Get to the squire and buy it!'

'Wait, Antek, just a minute, let me just get my thoughts in order ...' said Mateusz.

'You'll see how well I manage!' Szymek spoke rapidly. 'Who ploughed at my mother's? Who sowed? Who brought in the harvest? Why, just me! And did I do badly, eh? Am I an idler, eh? The whole village will tell you, as my mother's my witness! Just give me some land. Help me, brothers born – I'll be in debt to you till my dying day. Help me, dear people, help!' he cried, laughing and crying by turn, almost completely drunk with joyful hope.

But as soon as he'd calmed down a little, they began to weigh up and deliberate these plans together.

'If only the squire agrees to the payments!' said Nastka, sighing.

'With me and Mateusz standing guarantor, why not?'

Nastusia wanted to kiss Antek's hands for all this kindness.

'I've borne misery enough to know how it tastes to others!' he said quietly, getting up to leave, for it had grown quite dark below, though the sky was still bright and the sunset still glowing in the west.

Antek stood for some time by the pond, hesitating about which way to go, then after a moment he set off for home.

Yet he went slowly even so, as though forcing himself, stopping every so often to speak to acquaintances. There were plenty of people out on the road, beasts wandering and children playing. Singing quavered in the farmyards, elsewhere geese began to honk, there were shouts from boys bathing by the mill and friends quarrelling on the other side of the pond, most likely in front of the Balcereks, while the piercing strains of a pipe assailed the ears.

Though Antek was in no hurry and he was happy to stop along the road and talk with anyone, in the end he found himself in front of his own cottage. The windows stood open and lit up. A child was crying by the wall, and Hanka's shrill voice resounded from the yard, followed now and then by Józka's sharp retorts.

He hesitated again, but when Łapa started whining and jumping for joy beside him, he kicked him aside in sudden anger and turned back to the village. He reached the path to the presbytery, slipped around the organist's house so quietly that even the dogs didn't sense him and slid past the priest's orchard, along a wide baulk separating the Kłąbs' land from the priest's.

He was submerged in the deep shadows of full-grown trees. A sickle moon now hung in the darkened sky and the stars began increasingly to glow and flicker; the truly summer evening was growing warm and dewy. The quails called from the crops and the deep hoot of bitterns came from the distant meadows, while above the fields hung a silence so fragrant it made the head spin.

But Jagusia did not come.

About half a *staje* from Antek, however, strolled the priest, bare-headed and dressed in white, so engrossed in his prayers that he seemed not to notice that his horses, grazing on the dry, well-worn fallows, had crossed the baulk and were greedily devouring the Kłąbs' dark forest of clover, now grown magnificent and covered in flowers.

The priest walked on, mumbling his prayers, gazing at the stars, and sometimes stopped, listening keenly, and if there were any movement at all from the village side, he'd turn back hurriedly, grumbling as though cross at the horses.

'And where do you think you've clambered, my greyling? Into Kłąb's clover, eh? Would you look at the rascals! You like the taste of what's not yours, eh? Do you want to feel the whip on your behind? The whip, I say!' he threatened them sternly.

But the horses were munching with such relish that the priest didn't have the heart to chase them away to prevent the damage they were doing. He just looked about, declaring quietly:

'Well, gobble away, the pair of you, go on ... I'll say a prayer for a soul that's kin to the Kłąbs or pay them for the damage! The lazybones, how they do latch on to fresh clover!'

And again he went back and forth, saying his prayers and keeping watch, with not a clue that Antek was looking on, listening and waiting with increasing anxiety for Jagusia.

A good few prayers went by like this, until suddenly it occurred to Antek to approach the priest and confess his woes.

'He's that learned, maybe he'll find some solution more quickly!' he deliberated, moving down the side of the barn in the shadows. Finally at the quoin he came out boldly on to the baulk and cleared his throat loudly.

On hearing someone approach, the priest shouted at the horses:

'You confounded pests! You cannot take your eyes off them or they're straight into someone's field like pigs! Out you go, chestnut!' And hitching up his robe, he chased them out.

'Boryna! How are you?' he called, recognizing Antek up close.

'Why, I were looking for you, Father, and I've been to the presbytery already.'

'I came out to say my prayers and mind the horses, for Walek's rushed off to the manor. But they're such spoilt pests, God save us, I cannot manage them. Look how Kłab's clover has sprouted, like a forest! And from my seed ... Whereas mine caught the frost and there's only chamomile and thistles left!' He sighed mournfully as he perched on a rock. 'Sit down and we'll talk! Lovely evening! Another three weeks and the scythes will be ringing! Indeed they will!'

Antek sat down beside him and began to explain slowly why he'd come. The priest listened carefully, taking his snuff and shouting now and then at the horses, sneezing energetically as he did so.

'Where do you think you're going? That's not yours, are you blind? Look at them, spoilt swine!'

Meanwhile, Antek faltered; he stammered and grew confused.

'I see something serious is bothering you. Confess sincerely and you'll feel relief, confess! To whom can you pour out your soul if not to the priest?' He patted him on the head and offered him tobacco, so that Antek, garnering courage, told him all his woes.

The priest weighed his words at length, sighed and said finally:

'For the woodsman, I'd set you a church penance: you were defending your father, and since the other was a rascal and a Lutheran, it was no great shame! But the courts will not let it pass. It'll be four years at least! What can I advise? My God, people lead lives in America too, and they also come back from prison. But one's not much good and the other's no better.'

He was all for Antek running away, even tomorrow, and then he counselled staying and doing his time, but in the end he said:

'One thing's for sure: put yourself in the hands of Providence and wait on God's mercy.'

'Ha, they'll clap me in irons and send me to Siberia ...'

'But many return. I know one myself who did ...'

'Aye, but what'll I find at the house after so many years, eh? Can a woman manage by herself? Everything'll go to ruin!' he whispered helplessly.

'I'd help you from the bottom of my heart, if I could ... Wait, I can say a Mass at the Transfiguration of the Lord for your intention. Help me drive my horses into the stable – it's late! Well, it's late, I say, time for bed!'

Antek was so upset by all these tribulations that he didn't remember Jagusia until he was leaving the priest's farmyard. He rushed off to find her.

Aye, she was waiting crouched by the barn.

'I waited and waited!' Her voice sounded hoarse from the dew.

'Could I get away from the priest?' He made to embrace her, but she pushed him away.

'I've not got fun nor fondling on my mind!'

'Why, I barely recognize you!' He felt offended.

'I'm just the way you left me ...'

'Not like yourself ...' He moved closer.

'Surprised are you, after you'd not bothered with me for so long?'

'I could hardly be more bothered. Couldn't come running, though, could I?'

'And I were left alone with nothing but a corpse and troubles!' She shivered with cold.

'And didn't it enter your head to visit me? You had something else on your mind!'

'Were you waiting on me, Jantoś, were you?' she stammered mistrustfully.

'And how! Every day I were clinging to the grating, straining my eyes for you. Every day I waited!' He shook with sudden desolation.

'Dear Jesus! And you'd cursed me at the hayrick that time! And before, you were that cross! And when they took you, you didn't even glance at me, nor say a word ... I marked it well: you had a good word for everyone, even the dog, but not for me! I thought I'd go mad then!'

'I wasn't angered at you, Jaguś, no. But when your soul's burning with griefs, you're ready to ruin yourself and the whole world too ...'

They were silent, standing hip to hip. The moon shone straight into their faces and they were breathing heavily, rent by stinging memories, their eyes swimming with tears steeped in grief and torment.

'You didn't use to greet me like this,' he said sadly.

All at once, she burst into mournful tears like a child.

'How am I meant to greet you, how? Haven't you hurt me and abused me enough, so that now people look at me like I'm some dog ...'

'I abused you? It's my doing?' He was angry now.

'Yes, you! It's on your account that shrew chased me out the house, that drudge! It's on your account I'm the laughing stock of the whole village ...'

'Forgotten the Voyt, have you? And the others, eh?' he exploded balefully.

'It's all because of you! All of it!' she whispered, ever more resentful. 'Why did you snare me, like a dog? You had your own woman after all. Stupid, I was, obsessed, so that I couldn't see God's whole wide world beyond you! And why did you leave me alone after, high and dry?'

But, torn by regrets, he too hissed through clenched teeth:

'Did I ask you to be my stepmother? Snared you, aye, so that you rolled about with anyone who wanted, eh?'

'Why didn't you forbid me, then? If you'd loved me, you wouldn't have let me go, you wouldn't have left me alone, but guarded me from ill fortune, like others do!' She complained painfully and so full of unplumbed desolation that he could defend himself no longer. All his grudges melted away, and love stirred in his heart again.

'Hush, Jaguś, hush little one!' he whispered with tenderness.

'And the harm that's been done me, and now you start on me like everyone else, you too! You!' she sobbed, leaning her head against the barn.

Sitting her down next to him on the baulk, Antek began to press her to his heart and hug her, stroking her hair and wiping her tear-stained face. He kissed her trembling lips and her eyes, full of bitter tears, those beloved, saddened eyes. He caressed her, fondling and soothing her as well as he could, so that her crying subsided gradually and she clung to him and hung on his neck so trustingly and laid her head on his breast as though on a mother's heart, where it is so good to spill out all one's hurts and sorrows ...

But Antek's head was swimming, for such delight radiated from her and her warmth so inflamed him that he kissed her more and more fiercely and gripped her more and more forcefully ...

At first she didn't mark where this was leading and what was happening to her. Only when she felt herself completely in his power and he began to crush her lips with burning kisses did she begin to struggle and beg timidly, almost tearfully:

'Let me go, Jantoś! Let go! For God's sake, I'll scream!'

But could she break free of such a dragon when he was squeezing her until she was breathless, hot and trembling all over.

'One last time, let me, just once!' he could barely whimper, panting now.

The world spun and she plunged as though to the bottom of some paradise. He took her as he used to, passionately, with all the force of love's delight, and she gave herself up as she used to, in the sweet torment of surrender, to immeasurable happiness, to death itself ...

Just as before, my Jesus! As in the past! As always!

The night was full of stars now. The moon hung high, halfway across the sky, and the warm fragrant air enveloped the sleepy fields in unfathomable silence. The whole world lay breathless in a heady daze, in the sweet caress of oblivion.

And there was no moderation in them now, nothing but fire and storm, nothing but eternally ravenous and eternally insatiable desire. As when a poor withered tree unites with a thunderbolt and explodes into the sky in flames so that they perish together, booming out a nuptial hymn of perdition, so were they engulfed by voracious ardour. The old loves were revived in them, and they were clenched together in an outburst of exuberant joyful fire for that one moment of abandon, for that one last minute of happiness.

And when they sat side by side once more, something had already clouded their souls, and they glanced at each other fearfully, surreptitiously, avoiding each other's eyes as though with shame and regret.

In vain did he seek her lips with his, hungry for kisses, as before: she turned away unwilling. In vain did he whisper the sweetest endearments: she did not answer, staring intently at the moon, so that he seethed inside and cooled, strangely morose and overwhelmed by regrets. They sat, not knowing what to say now, with growing impatience and waiting for who would move first and be off.

And in Jagusia everything was quite extinguished and crumbled into ashes, for she spoke up with barely suppressed animosity:

'Well, didn't you force me, like a ruffian!'

'Aren't you mine, Jaguś, mine?' He wanted to draw her close. She pushed him away violently.

'I'm neither yours, nor anyone's, understand? Not anyone's!'

She burst into tears again, and he did not calm her now, nor embrace her, but after some time said in a grave voice:

'Would you come with me, Jaguś, away into the world?'

'Where to?' She raised her tear-filled eyes to him.

'To Hamerica even! Would you go with me, Jaguś?'

'And what'll you do with your wife?'

He started as though someone had lashed him with a whip.

'I'm serious! You going to poison her or what?'

Seizing her by the waist, Antek pulled her close and, kissing her whole face passionately, begged and beseeched her to run away with him, where they could be together for ever. He spoke at length of his plans and hopes, clinging suddenly to this idea of fleeing with her like a drunk clutching a fence, and like a drunk he babbled, caught up in feverish agitation. She heard him to the end and answered with irony:

'You've forced me into sin, so you think I've lost my reason completely and will believe any old nonsense ...'

He swore to all of it as the sacred truth. Tearing herself away, unwilling even to listen, she whispered:

'I wouldn't dream of running off with you. What for? Am I badly off alone?'

Wrapping her apron around her, she looked about carefully. 'It's late. I've got to run!'

'What's so urgent? No one's looking out for you at home.'

'But it's late for you. Hanka's airing the quilt and sighing already ...'

Enraged as a rabid dog at her words, he hissed scornfully:

'I don't reproach you with who's waiting around at inns for you ...'

'If you but knew! There's many ready to wait till sun-up, if you but knew! You're well pleased with yourself and think you're the only one!' she said scathingly, scoffing.

'Off you go, then. Let it even be the Jew, go on!' he choked.

But she didn't move from the spot. They stood side by side, breathing heavily and glaring at one another, as though searching for the most painful words they could find.

'You had something to say to me. Say it, then, for I shan't be coming out again ...'

'Don't worry, I shan't be asking, no ...'

'You can whine at my feet, I shan't come.'

'Aye, you've not the time, with that many to see by night ...'

'May you die like a dog!' She leapt into the fields to take a short cut.

He did not chase her nor even call out, watching as she flew across the furrows like a shadow and disappeared by the orchards. Rubbing his eyes as though from sleep, he sighed gloomily.

'I've lost my mind completely! Jesus, what a woman can lead you to.'

On his way back to the cottage he felt strangely ashamed. Unable to forgive himself for what had happened, he was sorely tormented and distressed by it.

His bedding was waiting for him already in the orchard, in the cart-basket, since it was impossible to sleep inside with the heat and the flies.

But Antek did not drop off. Instead, he lay staring into the distant flicker of the stars and, listening to the night's quiet steps, he pondered over Jagus.

'I can live neither with her nor without her! Damn it!' he cursed quietly and sighed dolefully. He tossed from side to side, throwing off the quilt and sticking his legs into the cool dewy grass, but sleep would not come and thoughts of her didn't cease for even the blink of an eye.

A child cried out in the cottage and Hanka murmured. He lifted his head, but it grew quiet in a moment and again he was assailed by thoughts that passed through him like fragrant springtime breezes, rocking his soul with sweet memories, but he did not let himself be possessed by them. On the contrary, he surveyed them soberly, and in the end he finished by announcing solemnly to himself as though at holy confession:

'There's got to be an end to it! Shameful it is, and a sin! What would people say! Why, I'm the father of children and a farmer! There must be an end to it.'

So he resolved, but how full of regret he was, such untold regret.

'Let a person only once let himself go, he's that friendly then with evil that death cannot separate him from it!' he meditated loftily and bitterly.

Dawn was coming, the whole sky dressed as though in a rough shroud, but Antek slept on, and when broad day began to peer into his eyes, Hanka came running to wake him. He lifted his despondent face to her, yet when she told him what the blacksmith had come about late the evening before, he was strangely tender, stroking her uncombed hair.

'Since it's worked out with the carting, I'll buy you something at the fair.'

She cheered up immensely at this kindness and began to pester him to buy a glazed cupboard for the plates like they had at the organist's.

'It'll be a manor sofa next!' He laughed, but promising to get whatever she asked, he got up quickly, for work was waiting as it did every day and the neck must be bent to the yoke and the load borne.

He spoke with the blacksmith and right after breakfast sent Pietrek off to cart dung while he himself took a couple of horses to the forest.

The clearing was fair humming with work. A good few folk were busy readying the trees cut down in winter, the scrape of saws and thump of axes echoing like the ceaseless hammering of woodpeckers, while in the lush grass of the clearing grazed the Lipce herds and fires were smoking. He remembered what had taken place here before and shook his head, seeing how peaceably the Lipce folk now worked with the Rzepki gentry and the rest.

'Poverty brought 'em to reason. What was it all for, eh?' he said to Filip, Jagustynka's son, who was hewing the pines.

'And who was to blame, if not the squire and the farmers!' the peasant muttered grimly without pausing as he lopped off branches.

'More like anger, maybe, and stupid incitement.'

He lingered at the place where he'd killed the woodsman, and something baneful stabbed at his chest so that he swore.

'The scum, he were the cause of all my ruin. I'd do the same again, and more for good measure!' He spat and set to work.

And so he spent whole days carting timber to the mill, applying himself to the work with fervour as though his life depended on it, but despite this he did not quell the memory of Jagusia or of that unhappy business.

One day Mateusz told him that they'd bought land at Podlesie, that the squire had given it on instalment and had promised outcuts and scantlings of wood besides, so Nastusia's wedding had been put off until Szymek had organized himself a bit.

But what did other folk's affairs concern him – did he not have worries enough of his own? And on top of that, the blacksmith came almost every day now, terrifying him in every possible way about the case and slowly, warily, with enormous cunning, hinting that should there be urgent need, then this man or that could help with funds ...

A hundred times Antek had been ready to chuck it all in and flee, but whenever he gazed at the village and grasped that he would have to leave it for ever, he was seized with such terror that he preferred prison, he preferred the very worst to that.

Yet the thought of prison filled his soul with despair.

And so this conflict within him made him grow haggard and bitter and he became stern and intolerant in the house. Hanka wracked her brains over what could be up, trying in vain to discover what had happened. She even suspected at first that he'd been with Jagusia again; but her eye was keen, and Jagustynka, well fed now, was watching them too. Others confirmed that they were clearly avoiding each other and did not meet, so she calmed down on that score. What of it that she served him as loyally as she could, that she had choice food ready and on time, that order was kept in the cottage, that the farm was going as well as could be, when he was forever cross, morose, affronted at the slightest thing and never had a kind word?

And harder still it was when he went about quiet, troubled, sad as an autumn night and was neither cross nor resentful but just sighed deeply and spent whole evenings drinking at the inn with his mates. She didn't dare ask openly, and Rocho too swore he knew of nothing that could be wrong, since the old man now came only at night, and spent whole days wandering the neighbourhood with his books, teaching the pious services to the Heart of Jesus that they'd banned from holding in church.²

Then one evening, when they were still sitting over their bowls inside the cottage, as a wind had risen after sunset, a whole pack of dogs began to bark at the pond. Rocho put down his spoon and listened keenly.

'A stranger. We should take a look.'

He came back almost at once, looking pale, and said quickly:

'Broadwords ringing on the road! If they ask, I'm in the village.' He leapt into the orchard and was gone.

Antek went deathly pale and jumped to his feet. The dogs had run into the farmyard and there were heavy footsteps on the porch.

'Maybe they've come for me already?' he moaned, terrified.

They all froze at the sight of gendarmes on the threshold. Antek couldn't move, his eyes darting towards the open window and doors. It was lucky that Hanka, calm as could be, invited them to sit down, pushing up the bench.

The gendarmes greeted them politely, demanding supper at the same time, so she had to fry them some eggs.

'Why so late?' Antek asked eventually.

'On duty! We've got quite the *delo!*'⁸ replied the sergeant, looking over those gathered in the room.

'After thieves are you?' Antek added more boldly now, bringing a bottle out of the storeroom.

'After thieves and others too! Drink to us, farmer!'

He had a drink with them while they applied themselves to the fried eggs until their spoons rang.

Everyone sat hushed as frightened rabbits. The gendarmes scraped their bowls clean and had another shot of vodka, while the sergeant, wiping his moustache, said solemnly:

'Been out long, eh?'

'You know yourself well enough!' He shuddered slightly.

'And where's Rocho?' the sergeant asked suddenly.

'Which Rocho?' He'd understood in a flash and calmed down markedly.

'Apparently there's a Rocho lives with you?'

'Maybe, sir, you mean that old granddad who goes around the village? Why, true, they call him Rocho.'

The gendarme shrugged impatiently and said threateningly:

'Less of the *shutki*,⁹ it's well known he lives with you!'

'For sure, he often stayed with us, but with others too. He's a beggar, so he lays his head wherever he lands for the night. Today in a cottage, tomorrow in a byre, and sometimes simply under a fence. What have you got on him then, sir?'

'Ah nothing, I ask for old times' sake ...'

'He's an honest man, wouldn't muddy anyone's water,' Hanka put in.

'*Ni*, we know what he is, that we do!' he muttered meaningfully, trying in whatever way he could to elicit information about him. He even offered his snuff, but they all stuck to the same story and, unable to sniff out anything, he got up from the bench and announced crossly: 'And I'm saying, he lives here in your house!'

'Well, I'm not hiding him in my pocket!' retorted Antek.

'I'm here on duty, *ponimaite*,¹⁰ Boryna!' the sergeant hissed threateningly, though he was appeased somewhat by the mendel of eggs he got for the road and a sizeable pat of fresh butter. Witek followed them, step by step, and recounted afterwards how they'd called at the Soltys's place and had tried to look in at various windows still lit, but the dogs had barked so that they didn't manage to peep in anywhere covertly and went away with nothing.

But the incident strangely upset Antek. As soon as he was alone with his wife, he began to confess all his woes.

She listened carefully, heart thumping, not letting a single word slip. Only at the end when he declared that there was nothing for it but to sell up and run away, even to Hamerica, did she respond, standing before him pale as the wall.

'I'll not go and I'll not permit the children to go to perdition!' she threatened. 'I'll not go! And if you make me, I'll smash the children's heads in with an axe and jump into the well myself! So help me God, I mean it! Just remember that!' she shouted, kneeling down in front of the holy pictures as though making a solemn vow.

'Hush! Why, I'm just talking!'

She breathed again and said quietly, barely holding back the tears:

'You'll do your time, and you'll come back! Don't you worry, I will manage ... I won't lose a single strip, you don't know me yet ... I'll not let a thing out my grip. If the Lord Jesus helps me, then I'll bear even this scourge,' she said, crying quietly.

He pondered a long time and finally said:

'It'll be as God wills it! We must wait for the case.'

So all the blacksmith's cunning wiles had come to nothing.

CHAPTER 6

'Would you lie down and stop disturbing me!' muttered Mateusz, exasperated, as he turned on to his other side.

Szymek lay still for a moment, then as soon as the other had started snoring again, he began quietly to creep down from the hayloft, since it seemed to him that the first traces of daybreak were already stealing into the barn where they were sleeping.

He felt about on the threshing floor for the tools, already prepared the day before, and was in such a hurry that, again and again, things fell from his hands with a piercing clatter and Mateusz cursed in his sleep.

Darkness still lay upon the ground, though the stars were paler now. Shapes were emerging on the eastern side and chickens were beginning to flap their wings and cluck hoarsely.

Gathering everything in a barrow and, creeping quiet as could be around the cottage, Szymek came out by the pond.

The village was sleeping the sleep of the dead. Not even a dog barked, and only the burbling of water could be heard in the silence, pressing through the mill's lowered sluices. It was still so dark along the road, shaded by orchards, that just a white wall could be made out here and there, while the glitter of reflected stars was all that could be seen of the pond.

Approaching his mother's house, he slowed his steps, listening intently, since someone seemed to be pacing in the farmyard, with quiet but constant mumbling.

'Who's there?' All at once he heard his mother's voice.

He froze and held his breath, not daring to move, while the old woman, not waiting for an answer, again began to walk about.

He saw her like a shadow shifting beneath the trees, tapping her way with a stick and reciting a litany under her breath as she walked.

'She knocks about at night like Marek in hell.'¹ he thought to himself, but with a quiet and mournful sigh. He moved on fearfully. 'It's my wrongs eating at her! Eating away!' he repeated with deep satisfaction, having reached the wide bumpy road beyond the mill. Suddenly he began to run as though something were chasing him, ignoring the dips and stones underfoot.

He didn't stop until he reached the cross, where the Podlesie roads branched. It was still too dark to get to work, so he sat by the holy figure to catch his breath a little and wait.

'Robbers' hour – you can't tell the field from the wood,' he muttered, casting his eyes all about. The fields were still sunk in teeming darkness, but golden streaks of dawn were brightening the sky.

The time dragged, so he began his prayers, but every time he touched the dewy ground with his hand, he forgot the words and remembered with delight that he was going to his own place now, to his own farm.

'I've got you and I shan't let go,' he thought proudly. With joy and the boundless devotion of love, his sparkling eyes devoured the tangle of darkness by the forest where those six morgen bought from the squire were already waiting for him.

'I'll gather you up, my poor darlings, and never let you go, so long as I live!' he muttered, pulling the sheepskin across his dishevelled shirt, for he was feeling the cold a little, and leaning back against the cross, gazing into the dawn and soon overcome by sleep, he began to snore.

The fields were turning grey, like wide stretches of water, and the wheat, hoary with dew, was flicking him with its swaying ears when he leapt to his feet.

'Broad day, time for work,' he whispered, stretching his bones. He knelt at the cross for his prayers, but didn't rattle them off as usual, to get them over, sighing, beating his breast and signing the cross until his arm ached. Today was different. He begged the Lord's help tenderly and with his whole soul, until his tears ran and, clasping Jesus' feet, he pleaded, gazing with devoted eyes into his tormented and holy face:

'Help me, merciful Jesus! My own born mother has done me wrong: I'm in your hands alone, a poor wretch! Help me! Why, here I am, like the lowliest of 'em all, come to labour! Aye, I'm a sinner, but help me, merciful Lord, and I'll give an offering for a Mass, maybe two! I'll buy a heap of candles, and when I've earned enough, I'll even sort a baldachin!' So he begged and promised sincerely, pressing his lips to the cross. Then he went round it on his knees, kissing the ground humbly, and stood up greatly fortified and with renewed confidence.

He felt strong now, ready for anything, and in such good spirits that, taking up the heavy barrow, he pushed it like a feather, looking with satisfaction towards Lipce down below, still all in mist from which only the church spire emerged, its golden cross glittering high in the sunrise.

'You'll see! *Hej!* You'll see!' he cried joyfully, stepping on to his plot of land. It lay right by the forest, adjoining the Lipce fields on one side, but Lord have mercy, what place was this! A wasteland, with dips left by disused claypits and full of rubble and stone heaps overgrown with briars. Mullein, mayweed and great water dock flourished on the knolls, and here and there a twisted pine strained upwards, or a clump of alders or junipers, while in the boggy ground and dells, rushes and reeds teemed like a young forest. In a word, the land was such that a dog would shed tears over it, even the squire had advised against it, but the boy had insisted.

'It's just right for me! I'll make something of it!'

Mateusz too had discouraged him, looking with horror at this wilderness where only the grange dogs ran riot, but Szymek stuck to his guns, finally saying firmly:

'My mind's made up! All land is good when a man puts his hand to it!'

And he took it, since the squire was selling it cheap, at sixty roubles a morgen, and promised help with wood and all manner of things.

'Ha, how will I not manage!' he cried, his shining eyes darting over it, and, setting the barrow on the baulk, he proceeded to walk his boundaries, marked by branches stuck in the ground.

He walked slowly and in such deep and quiet joy that his heart thumped like a hammer and he had a lump in his throat. He walked, sorting in his head what order he would do things and where to begin. After all, he was doing it for himself, for Nastusia, for the future Pacześ line, so strength and fierce determination fortified him, as a hungry wolf is fortified by fresh meat when it catches a sheep.

And having gone round all the field, he began carefully to choose the place for a cottage.

'This'll be just right: village opposite and the forest beside – it'll be easier for wood and quieter in the winter,' he deliberated. Marking the four quoins with stones, he threw off his sheepskin, crossed himself, and spitting on his palms began to clear and level the ground.

A golden day had dawned, and from the village drifted the bellowing of herds driven out to pasture. Well winches creaked, people were coming out to work, carts rumbled along the roads and different voices floated along the faint breeze that rollicked among the crops, just as it did every day. But, oblivious to everything, Szymek was lost in his work, save for pausing at times to straighten his back and catch his breath, wiping his eyes awash with sweat, before once again clinging to the earth like an insatiable leech, muttering all the while to everything as though it were living, as was his custom.

As he set about shifting a massive stone, he would address it:

'You've been lying about and had your rest, so now you can prop up my house.'

And cutting back the blackthorn bushes, he'd say with a mocking laugh:

'Don't resist, stupid! Thinks it can defy me! As if! I'm hardly going to leave you there to rip my trousers, eh?'

To the never-ending stone heaps, he declared:

'I'll shift you lot too, all jostling together in a heap! I'll make you into fine paving by the byre, like at the Borynas!'

And sometimes, catching his breath, he'd sweep his land with a loving gaze and whisper ardently:

'Mine, you are! Mine! No one'll tear you away from me!'

And full of compassion for this poor, weed-infested, barren, infertile and desolate plot, he added fondly, as though to a small child:

'Just wait a bit, little waif. I'll fix you up, feed and coddle you, and you'll be fertile as the others. Don't you fear, you'll be well satisfied, you will.'

The sun had climbed over the fields and was shining straight in his eyes.

'Thank God!' he said, squinting. 'Another hot day coming. Dry too,' he added, for the sun was rising a deep red.

The Angelus bell sounded shortly at the church, and bluish columns of smoke slowly began to rise from the chimneys of Lipce.

'You'd like a bite now, farmer, eh?' He tightened his belt. 'But Mother won't be bringing the double pot, no, oh no.' He sighed sadly.

The forest-side fields were swarming with people now. Like him, they were starting work on their newly acquired lands; he spied Stacho Płoszka, ploughing with a pair of stout horses.

'My Jesus, when will you give us just the one?' he thought.

Meanwhile, Józef Wachnik was carting stones for cottage foundations, Kłab and his sons were digging a trench around their land, and Grzela, the Voyt's brother, was spending a long time measuring something right by the cross at the road.

'Looks like he's choosing a place for an inn,' noted Szymek.

Grzela, having marked the site measured with pegs, came over to greet him.

'Ho, ho! You're working for ten, I see!' His eyes were full of amazement.

'Don't I need to? What've I got? Only my breeches and these bare hands!' Szymek muttered, not lifting his hands from the work.

Grzela advised him on this and that, and returned to his own plot. Others came by after him, some with a kind word, some to chat and some just to smoke a cigarette and grin, but Szymek answered with increasing impatience, until finally he shouted sharply at Pryczek:

'Get on with your own business and leave others be! Scum are having 'emself a holiday!'

And then he was left alone, for they all avoided him.

The sun climbed higher and higher and hung over the church now. Relentlessly it rose, flooding the world with hot, blinding brightness. The wind had vanished somewhere, allowing the heat to fling a shimmering sheet, unimpeded, over the earth, beneath which the cereal crops basked in the hushed and simmering swelter.

'You won't chase me off so fast,' he said, as though defying the sun. Spying Nastusia with breakfast, he set off to meet her, greedily seizing the double pot.

She glanced somewhat gloomily about the fields.

'Like anything's going to grow on this bog and gravel!'

'Everything'll grow, you'll see, you'll have wheat for your cakes.'

'Wait away, while the wolves eat the mare.'

'They won't, Nastuś! The land's here already, so waiting's easier – why, a whole six morgen of our own,' he explained, eating hurriedly.

'Aye, well, plenty of ground to chew on! And how will we get through the winter?'

'I'll see to that, don't you worry! I've thought it all through and I'll find a way for everything!' He pushed away the empty pots and stretched before showing her round, explaining it all.

'Here there'll be a cottage!' he cried joyfully.

'Will there! I suppose you'll shape it from mud like a swallow!'

'From trees and branches, and clay, and sand, and anything there is, if only to last the year, till we're better off.'

'You've got a fine manor in mind, I see!' she snapped grudgingly.

'I prefer a hut to being someone's hired hand.'

'Płoszkowa said to come to them for the winter, and she offered to give us the room of her own accord, out of the goodness of her heart.'

'The goodness of her heart, oh aye. She wants to annoy Mother, since they're at each other's throats like dogs. That pox-ridden old bag, I don't need her kindness. Don't worry, Nastuś, I'll fix you such a cottage. There'll be a window and a stove and everything that's needed. You'll see: it'll be standing ready in three weeks like the amen to a prayer. It'll be here, if I have to work my fingers to the bone.'

'As if. You're going to build it yourself, I suppose!'

'Mateusz will help me, he promised!'

'Wouldn't your mother help at all?' she asked timidly.

'I wouldn't ask her if I were dying!' he shouted, but seeing that she was even sadder, he was most distressed. When they sat down by the rye, he began to explain plaintively:

'How can I, Nastuś? Why, she threw me out and rails against you.'

'My God, she could at least give a cow. This way we're like the worst o' beggars, without a thing. It's dreadful to think of!'

'There'll be a cow, Nastuś, there will, I've got my eye on one already.'

'But there's not a cottage, nor a cow, nor anything!' she cried, nestling against him. He wiped her eyes and stroked her head, but since he'd now come over all miserable as well, it was a wonder he didn't burst out crying too. Leaping to his feet and snatching up his shovel, he shouted as though sorely angered:

'For God's sake, woman, so much work and all you do is complain!'

She got up, full of grave worries and many a care.

'Well, if we don't die of hunger, the wolves'll get us in this wilderness.'

He was properly angered now and, setting to work, said grimly:

'If you're going to bawl and talk rubbish, then you'd best stay home.'

She wanted to hug and mollify him, but he pushed her away.

'Ha, it's no time for romancing, for sure!' He let himself be caressed, however, though still cross at this women's talk, so that she went away tranquil and even merry.

'Good God! Why, a woman's human too, but she can't reason like a human being. Just crying and lamenting. Nothing'll fall from the sky of its own accord if you don't make it with your own hands. Like a kid, with all the laughing and crying and tantrums and complaints! Heaven's sake!'

He muttered to himself, getting down to work, so that soon he forgot everything.

And so he worked, day after day, up at first dawn and back late in the evening. Sometimes he didn't open his mouth to a living soul all day. Tereska brought him food, or someone else did, since Nastusia was working in kind on the priest's potatoes.

At first one person or other would look in on him, but since he was unwilling to chat, they just watched him from afar, marvelling at his tireless labour.

'He's a tough one! Who'd have thought it,' muttered Kłab.

'Dominikowa's spawn after all!' someone cried with a laugh, but Grzela, who had observed him keenly from the start, said:

'True, he's labouring like an ox, but it wouldn't hurt to help him with his load a little.'

'Aye, he won't manage alone, he's worth helping!' they agreed, though none was in a hurry to be first, waiting for him to ask of his own accord.

But Szymek did not ask. It did not even enter his head. So he was greatly puzzled to see a cart coming in his direction one day.

It was Jędrzej driving, and he shouted merrily from afar:

'Show me where to plough! Hey, it's me!'

Szymek could not believe his eyes for a good while.

'That you dared! You'll get a hiding, you beggar, you'll see.'

'Let her! And if I do, then I'll move to yours.'

'Was it your notion, to help?'

'It was! I wanted to long ago, but I was afeared. She were watching me, and Jagusia warned me against it as well,' he explained as he got down to work. Together they ploughed all day, and on leaving he promised to come the next day too.

And he did, with the rising sun, and Szymek immediately spotted that his cheeks were a little bruised, but did not ask about it until the evening:

'Did you get merry hell?'

'Eh ... she's blind, so weren't easy to get me, and I'm not going to climb into her clutches myself,' he replied somewhat gloomily.

'And Jagna didn't give you away?'

'Jagna's not going to betray us.'

'Till she gets something into her head. Who knows with women!' Szymek said, sighing dolefully, and forbade him from coming again.

'I'll manage myself now. You can help me later, with sowing.'

And again he was alone. The days passed, so stifling and baking hot that the earth cracked, the water dried up, the grass yellowed and the wheat stood barely alive in that hellish inferno. The fields emptied of folk and fell silent since it was impossible to tolerate work with that living fire pouring down and the sun devouring the eyes. The bleached, hazy sky hung like a fiery trembling sheet, wrapping the earth in such scorching heat that not a breath of wind stirred, not a tree moved, not a bird sang nor a human voice rose anywhere. Every day the sun travelled just the same from east to west, inexorably spreading fire and drought.

Szymek, too, got up to work every day just the same, not letting the heatwave deter him. He even slept out on the fields at night, in order not to waste time. Mateusz tried to restrain him in his urgency, but he retorted curtly:

'I'll rest on Sunday!'

On Saturday evening he came to the cottage, but was so exhausted that he fell asleep over his bowl and slept almost the whole day, for he didn't get up from his pallet until late afternoon and sat down in his Sunday best to the bowls heaped high. The women too waited on him as on a person of importance, filling up his plate again and again, and alert to every nod he gave. Having eaten his fill, he then loosened his belt, straightened his bones and boomed merrily:

'God bless, Mother! And now let's have a bit o' fun!'

And he headed for the inn with Nastusia, followed by Mateusz and Tereska.

Bowing to him from the waist, the Jew stood him vodka without being summoned and called him farmer, at which Szymek swaggered mightily. Drinking steadily, he clamoured with the best of them and told everyone his business.

It was crowded inside and the music was playing to liven things up, but no one had started dancing yet, and just drank to each other, lamenting the heat or the preharvest, as was usual at the inn. Even the Borynas turned up, with the blacksmith and his wife, though they went off to the snug and must have been knocking it back since the Jew kept on bringing them more vodka or beer.

'Antek's looking at his woman like a dog at a bone. I can scarce recognize the man,' Ambrozio declared gloomily, glancing in vain at the snug, from whence came the pleasant hum of voices.

'Seems he's better pleased with his own shoe than a boot that every foot has tried,' said Jagustynka with a laugh.

'Aye, but boots like that won't pinch your feet!' someone threw in and the whole inn burst out laughing, understanding Jagustynka's meaning.

Only Szymek did not laugh, and catching Jędrzych by the neck, he kissed him, and began declaiming, slurring every word:

'You should listen to me now – do you mark who it is talking to you?'

'Why I know, aye, only Mother forbad it,' Jędrzych stammered feebly.

'Never mind Mother! You should listen to me: I'm a farmer, I am.'

The musicians struck up a walking dance. There was instant uproar: heels hit the floor, beams squeaked, songs burst out and dancing pairs twirled. Catching Nastusia round the waist, Szymek unbuttoned his capote, tilted his cap and boomed: '*Du dana!*' He took the lead and shouted the loudest, stamping his heels the most passionately, turning the most sharply, and wheeling exuberantly, merrily, noisily, like a flood swollen with the force of spring.

But having danced once and twice, he let the women lead him out of the inn. Sober now, he sat awhile with them before the cottage. Jagustynka came along too and they chatted together, for though it was late and Szymek was gathering himself to go back, he did so sluggishly, dragging his feet and dawdling. He nestled against Nastka and sighed until her mother said:

'Stay in the barn. Where are you going to go wandering in the night?'

'When his bedding's all back at the hut,' said Nastka.

'Let him under your quilt then, Nastuś,' Jagustynka piped up.

'What are you saying! Ha, whatever next!' she objected, abashed.

'Why, he's your man after all! A bit sooner than the priest's blessing's no sin, and the boy's labouring like an ox. He should have some reward.'

'Holy truth! Nastuś! Nastuś!' He leapt upon the girl like a wolf, cornered her somewhere in the orchard and not letting her out of his grasp, kissed and wheedled:

'Will you banish me, Nastuś? Send me off into such a night?'

The mother busied herself in the hallway and Jagustynka said on parting:

'Don't resist him, Nastuś! There's that little good in the world, it comes up like grain for a blind hen, so don't let go of it.'

She passed Mateusz in the farmyard. Seeing through the window what was transpiring inside, he shouted to Szymek:

'I would have done it long ago in your shoes!' And he went off whistling to the village to find some joy.

But the next day, Szymek was up for work at dawn as always and laboured indefatigably, though when Nastuś brought his breakfast, he reached more hungrily for her red lips than for the double pot.

'Just you betray me and I'll pour boiling water on your head,' she threatened, pressing against him.

'My Nastuś ... you gave yourself to me ... I'll never let you go now,' he stammered ardently, and peering into her eyes he added more quietly: 'First one's got to be a boy.'

'Idiot! Ha, hark at the mischief in his head!' She pushed him off and ran away, her face flaming, since Pan Jacek had appeared not far off, smoking a pipe and clutching his fiddle under his arm.

Praising God in greeting, he asked about all manner of things. Szymek was happy to boast of what he'd done already, and suddenly was struck dumb and gaped, for Pan Jacek had put his fiddle to one side, thrown off his capote and set about mixing clay.

Szymek all but dropped his shovel and his mouth hung open.

'Why so surprised, eh?'

'How's this? Pan Jacek's going to work with me?'

'I am. I'll help you with your house. Do you think I can't? You'll see.'

And they worked together now. In truth, the old man was none too strong and unused to peasant's work, but he had such canny ways that the work went notably faster and more deftly. Indeed, Szymek eagerly deferred to him in all things, just grunting from time to time: 'Lordy, well this is unheard of in the world ... a squire ...'

Pan Jacek just laughed and began talking of all kinds of things, telling such tales of the world, it was a wonder Szymek did not fall to his feet in gratitude and amazement, though he did not dare. In the evening he ran off to tell Nastusia all about it.

'They say he's stupid, but he's like the cleverest priest!' he finished.

'Another one who talks clever and acts stupid! Aye, if he were right in the head, would he be helping you? Would he be grazing Weronka's cow?'

'True, there's no way to fathom it!'

'Nowt, but that he's wrong in the head.'

'But you'll not find a better person in the world.'

He was immeasurably grateful to Pan Jacek for his kindness. But though they worked together, ate from the same double pot and slept under a single sheepskin, still he felt too awkward for closer friendship with him.

'He'll always be the squire type,' Szymek thought with deep respect and gratitude, for with his help the cottage was springing up fast, so that by the time Mateusz came to help and the Kłąbs' Adam had carted the wood that was needed from the forest, the shack was so grand it could be seen from Lipce. Mateusz grafted hard for almost a week, and urged others on, and when they finished on Saturday afternoon, he hung a green wreath around the chimney² and ran off to his work.

Szymek was still whitewashing the chamber and clearing away the shavings and rubbish when Pan Jacek got changed, then, putting his fiddle under his arm, he said with a smile:

'The nest's ready, get yourself a hen ...'

'Why, the wedding's tomorrow after vespers,' Szymek hurried to thank him.

'I wasn't working for nothing! When they chase me out of the village, I'll come to you to lodge.' He lit his pipe and rambled off in the direction of the forest.

And Szymek, though he'd finished everything, still wandered around, stretching his weary bones and gazing at the cottage with unexpected delight.

'It's mine! Aye, mine!' he kept repeating, as though unable to believe his eyes. Walking round the cottage, he touched the walls and looked in at the windows, breathing in the musty smell of lime and fresh clay with pleasure, so that it was dusk before he set off for the village to get ready for the following day.

Indeed, everyone knew about the wedding, and a neighbour had taken the news to Dominikowa too, though the old woman pretended not to know what they were talking about.

So on Sunday the next day, early in the morning, Jagusia kept nipping stealthily out of the cottage with sizeable bundles, lugging them to Nastusia's through the gardens. Though she sensed well enough what was going on, the old woman made no opposition, but just wandered about, so silent and so morose that Jędrzych did not dare approach her until after High Mass.

'I'll be off then, Mother!' he whispered, warily keeping his distance.

'You'd best be putting the horses out to clover ...'

'You know it's Szymek's wedding today ...'

'Thank God it's not yours!' She gave a mocking laugh. 'Just you get drunk and you'll see what I've got in store!' she threatened crossly. When the boy went away to dress up, she wandered off somewhere to the village.

'I will get drunk, I will, on purpose!' he muttered, running across the village to Mateusz's cottage, where they were just leaving for church, though quietly, without singing, shouting or music. The wedding too was quite a dismal affair, with only two candles, so that Nastusia burst into floods of tears and Szymek sulked a bit and glared proudly and aggressively at people and around the empty church. Luckily the organist played a lively tune fit to set feet tapping as they were leaving, and things became more brisk and cheerful.

Right after the wedding, Jaguś went back to her mother's and looked in on the party later. Mateusz was playing the fiddle, Pietrek, the Borynas' farmhand, accompanying him on the pipe and someone drumming fiercely. Some danced inside the narrow chamber and the keener ones right in front of the cottage between the tables where the wedding guests were eating, drinking and talking quietly, since it was unseemly to make merry in broad daylight, and they were sober besides.

Szymek was forever tagging after his wife, pulling her into corners and kissing her so passionately that they mocked him, and Ambrozy, his eyes darting constantly to the glasses, declared darkly:

'Have fun today, man, for tomorrow you'll be weeping!'

True enough, it was not a lively party, nor was any greater fun in the offing, since several people, having had a little to eat and stayed a decent time as custom demanded, began to head for home once the sun went down and the sky was engulfed in the flames of sunset. Only Mateusz had livened up thoroughly. Playing and singing, he made the girls dance and passed round the vodka. As soon as Jagusia appeared, he eagerly kept her company, peering into her eyes and recounting something quietly and earnestly, ignoring Tereska's ever-watchful eyes, shining with tears.

Jaguś did not avoid him, for she blew neither hot nor cold in his regard. She listened patiently, though paying careful heed should Antek and his wife arrive, since not for anything did she want to run into them. Luckily, they did not come, nor were any of the bigger farmers there, though they hadn't turned the invitation down and had sent the wedding payment as was customary. When someone brought it up, Jagustynka called out in that way of hers:

'If there were all manner of tasty tidbits and their snouts had smelled the spirits, you'd not be able to chase the first 'uns away with a stick, but they don't like to hoist up their bellies for nothing or grind dry tongues.'

And since she was a little drunk now, and having spotted Contrary Jasiek in a corner sighing dolefully, wiping his nose and staring with besotted eyes at Nastusia, she pulled him over for the sport of it.

'Have a dance with her, have that bit o' fun at least, since your mother's forbad you to wed. Hang about and maybe she'll spare you a favour. She's got a man, so it's all the same to her if there's one or more of 'em.'

She came out with such notions, it fair made your ears tingle. When Ambrozy too got hold of a glass and set his own tongue wagging, the two of them held forth with such mirth that every belly in the place shook with laughter, the guests not even noticing how quickly the short night had passed.

In a flash, apart from family, there was only Ambrozy left draining the bottle dry, and the young couple decided to move to their own place. Mateusz urged them to stay in the cottage yet a while, but Szymek was adamant. He borrowed a horse from Kłab and put the trunk and bedding and pots and pans on the cart. Having seated Nastusia with pomp, he fell to her mother's feet, kissed his brother-in-law and bowed low to all their kin, then crossed himself, flicked the horse with a whip and set out, with the others walking alongside to see them off.

They went along in silence. The sun was just emerging, the fields awash in glittering dew and full of birdsong. Heavy ears of wheat were stirring and the whole world was bursting with the festive joy of a summer's day, which drifted from every blade like a holy prayer and rose straight into the bright sky.

It was after the mill, when two storks began clattering high above them, that Nastusia's mother spoke up, snapping her fingers:

'Touch wood! A good omen, you'll be granted children.'

Nastusia flushed a little and Szymek, steadying the cart over the bumps, whistled cheekily and boldly rolled his eyes.

When they were left alone, Nastusia, looking about her new homestead, burst into miserable tears until Szymek shouted:

'Stop bawling, stupid! Others don't have this much! They'll envy you yet,' he added. Since he was utterly exhausted and quite drunk, he threw himself down on some straw in the corner and was soon snoring, while she sat in front of the cottage and cried, gazing at the white walls of Lipce, visible among the orchards.

She was to cry more than once over her wretchedness, but less often over time since the village seemed to have conspired to help. First came Kłębowia with a hen under her arm and a brood of chicks in a basket, which clearly made a good start, since almost every day after that one of the housewives would look in and never empty-handed.

'Dear people, how can I ever repay you,' Nastusia whispered, greatly moved.

'With a kind word,' retorted Sikorzyna, handing her a piece of linen.

'When you're set up, you'll help those that are poorer,' added breathless Płoszkowa, pulling a hefty piece of pork fat from under her apron.

They brought so much that there was enough to last for some time. One evening at dusk, Jasiek brought them his dog Kruczek and, having tied him by the cottage, fled as though scalded.

They laughed not a little, telling Jagustynka about it as she was returning from the wood. The old woman pulled a wry face and said:

'He were picking blueberries in the afternoon for you, Nastuś, but his mother took them away.'

CHAPTER 7

Jagustynka made her way to the Borynas', bringing red berries for Józka. Since Hanka was just then milking a cow in front of the cottage, she sat down beside her on the earth bench, recounting at length how everyone was bringing Nastusia gifts.

'Ha, they're doing it to spite Dominikowa,' she concluded.

'It's all the same to Nastka, but I should take something too,' murmured Hanka.

'Get it ready and I'll take it,' Jagustynka recommended eagerly, when Józka's feeble, pleading voice came from inside:

'Hanus, give her my piglet! I'm going to die for sure, so Nastuś can say a prayer for me in return.'

This struck Hanka as a good idea, and straight away she ordered Witek to tie the piglet to a string and take it to Nastusia, since she hesitated to go herself.

'Witek, be sure to say the piglet's from me! And come back quick. I can't move at all!' Józka complained painfully. The poor wretch had been ill for a week and lay on the other side of the cottage, swollen, in a fever and all covered in spots. At first they had carried her out every day to the orchard under the trees, since she begged them to so piteously. But she only got worse and Jagustynka forbade taking her out into the fresh air.

'She must lie in the dark. In the sun, all the spots'll sink to her innards.'¹

And so she lay in the darkened room, moaning and quietly complaining that they wouldn't let the children come to see her, nor any of her friends, since Jagustynka, in whose care she was, chased everyone off with a stick.

Now, having chatted with Hanka, she went to give the berries to the sick girl and set about kneading a paste from pure buckwheat flour mixed with fresh unsalted butter and egg yolks, which she heaped thickly on to Józka's face and neck before covering them with wet rags. The girl submitted patiently to the remedies, though she asked anxiously:

'Will there be pocks on my cheeks?'

'Don't scratch and it'll pass without trace, just like it did with Nastusia.'

'When it itches so bad, my Jesus! You'd better tie up my hands. I can't stand it!' she begged tearfully, barely able to resist tearing at her skin. The old woman muttered some spell over her, censed her with dried sedum and, after tying her hands to her sides, went off to work.

Józka lay quietly, listening to the buzz of the flies and a strange hum that sounded constantly in her head. As though in a dream, she heard members of the household looking in on her and leaving without a word. It seemed to her that branches heavy with rosy apples were hanging low above her, but she started up in vain and couldn't reach them, or that sheep were crowding about her, bleating piteously. Yet as soon as Witek slipped into the room, she recognized him instantly.

'Did you take the sow? What did Nastusia say?'

'She were that glad at the piglet, it's a wonder she didn't kiss its tail.'

'Hark at him, having a laugh at Nastusia!'

'It's true! And she said to tell you she'll come tomorrow.'

All at once, she began to toss on the bed, shouting in alarm:

'Chase 'em away, they'll trample me. Chase 'em off! Baa! Baa!'

And then she lay so still, she seemed to have fallen asleep. Witek left, but looked in every once in a while.

She asked him anxiously:

'Is it noon?'

'Must be near midnight, they're all sleeping.'

'True, it's dark! Get the sparrows out from under the ridgepole. They're cheeping like they're being plucked!'

He began telling her something about nests, when she cried out, trying to sit up:

'Where's the greyling! Don't let her get hurt, Witek, or Father'll belt you!'

Another time she ordered him to sit closer and in a whisper began to tell him:

'Hanka's forbidden me to go to Nastusia's wedding, but I'm going anyway, on purpose, and I'll change into a blue bodice and that skirt I wore at the fair. They'll stare at me like anything, you'll see! Witek, pick me some apples, but don't let Hanka catch you! Aye, I'm only going to dance with farmhands!' She then suddenly stopped and fell asleep. Witek sat whole hours beside her, keeping the flies off with a branch and handing her water, watching over her like a brood hen, for Hanka had left him in the cottage to help out, and the Kłqbs' Maciuś was minding his cows together with his own.

The boy found it tedious at first, longing for the woods and his freedom, but he so pitied Józka in her illness that he would gladly have fetched her the moon and was constantly puzzling over how to entertain her or make her laugh.

One day he brought a whole brood of young partridges.

'Józka, stroke the birds and they'll cheep for you. Go on, give 'em a stroke.'

'What with,' she moaned, lifting her head.

When he untied her, she took the little flapping birds in her stiff helpless hands and pressed them to her face and eyes.

'Their souls are pounding inside 'em, they're so afraid, poor things! Let 'em go, Witek!'

'I tracked 'em down myself and now I'm to free 'em!' he protested, but he released them even so.

Another time, he brought a young hare and, holding him by the ears, placed him before her on the quilt.

'Dear little rabbit, bunnikins, they took you from your mama, little orphan, from your mama,' she whispered, pressing it to her breast like a child and stroking and caressing it. The hare bleated as though it were being torn apart and, struggling free, it jumped into the hallway among a flock of hens, which scattered everywhere with a racket. It then burst on to the porch, leaped across Łapa, snoozing in the hallway, and tumbled into the orchard with the dog chasing after and Witek following them, raising such a commotion that Hanka came running from the farmyard, while Józka laughed fit to burst.

'Happen the dog caught him, eh?' she asked, a little anxiously.

'As if! All he saw were his tail – the hare landed in the wheat like a stone in water, proper dodger! Don't be sad, Józka, I'll bring you another.'

And he brought whatever he could – quails that seemed dusted in gold, or a hedgehog, or a tame squirrel, which was so droll, jumping round the room, or young swallows cheeping so pitifully that the older ones broke into the room with cries of dismay – until Józka told him to give them back. He brought all manner of other things, not to speak of the apples and pears of which he smuggled as many as they could eat in secret, away from the adults. But now none of it amused her any more, she'd look unseeingly and turn away, bored and indifferent.

'I don't want it. Bring something new!' she fretted, turning her eyes away and not even looking at the stork as it dawdled about the room, pecking at all the pots and skulking by the door, waiting in vain for Łapa. She didn't brighten until one day, when he brought a live bee-eater:

'Jesus, what a beauty, like it's painted!'

'Watch it don't peck you on the nose, it's mad as a dog.'

'Eh, it's not even trying to escape. Has it been tamed or what?'

'Its wings and feet are fettered and I've tipped pitch in its eyes.'

They played with the bird for some time, but the bee-eater remained still and out of sorts. It didn't want to eat, and, to the great distress of the whole household, it died.

And so their days went by.

Outside it was scorching as always, and the closer harvest came, the hotter it got. The fields were impossible in the middle of the day, and the nights were little cooler, stuffy and hot, so that even in the orchards you couldn't rest for the heat. Downright disaster was befalling the village. The grass was so burnt that the cows came back hungry from pasture and bellowed in the byres. The potato plants wilted, growing knotted like nuts, and stayed that way. The sun-toasted oats barely rose above the ground, the barley yellowed and the rye dried up before its time, displaying barren white ears. Folk fretted considerably over this, staring with melancholy hope at each sunset for any sign of coming change, but the sky was always cloudless, like a glassy white inferno, and the sun a pure orb, without the slightest cloud obscuring it.

Many a heartfelt plea was uttered before pictures of the Lord's Transfiguration, but it helped not at all. The fields wilted and withered more and more, unripe fruit fell from the trees, wells dried up and even the water in the pond went down. The sawmill could not work and the mill stood closed and silent, so that, in despair, folk clubbed together for a votive Mass and Exposition, at which the whole village gathered.

And they prayed so fervently, with their whole hearts, that a stone would have taken pity on them. And it seemed that, in his mercy, the Lord Jesus was mollified. The next day it became so hot, so wearisome, stuffy and sultry, that even the birds grew listless, while the cows bellowed mournfully in the pastures, the horses refused to come out and people knocked about the parched orchards at the end of their tether with no strength left, afraid even to look into their gardens. But then, around noon, when everything seemed to be taking its last gasp in that boiling white shimmer, the sun suddenly darkened and dimmed as though someone had thrown up a handful of dust, and shortly afterwards something hooted high above, and swollen clouds closed in from every side, like a flock of birds with great wings, descending ever lower and more menacingly.

There was a thrill of terror. Everything fell silent and trembled in suspense.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. There was a brisk blast of wind. Dust clouds rolled along the roads, sunlight spilled like egg yolk into the sand and it darkened suddenly. Clusters of lightning teemed in the sky like the flash of fiery whips, and the first thunderbolt crashed somewhere nearby, so that people ran out of their cottages.

Suddenly everything was in complete turmoil. The sun went out. There was wild confusion and such a storm raged, with spurts of blinding brightness pouring through the tousled shadows. Lightning struck, thunder rolled across the sky, a downpour thrummed, and trees and gales moaned in the trees. The lightning flashed again and again, dazzling the eyes, and the rain came down so heavily that nothing could be seen, while hail pounded from every side.

The storm lasted for maybe an hour, flattening the crops and making the roads flow with rivers of foaming water, and as soon as it paused but a moment and brightened a little, straight away it would thunder like a thousand carts racing across frozen ground and more rain would pour as though tipped from a bucket.

People peered out with trepidation. Some had already lit vigil lamps here and there and were singing 'Beneath Thy Protection', while others had brought holy pictures out and stood them on the earth benches to guard against misfortune, but thanks to God the storm passed without wreaking greater damage. When it had almost completely subsided and a finer rain had begun to fall, a lightning bolt from the last cloud hanging over the village suddenly struck the Voyt's barn.

Flames leapt up, smoke billowed and in a flash the whole barn was on fire. A terrible clamour erupted in the village and anyone who could raced to the barn, but there was no question of saving it. From top to bottom it burned, like a heap of piled-up logs, so that Antek, Mateusz and others fought only to stop the Kozioł's cottage and other buildings from catching fire. Luckily there was no lack of water and mud on the road, for some roofs were already beginning to smoke, with sparks spraying on to the nearest outbuildings.

The Voyt was not at home. He had left early for the commune, and his wife, lamenting terribly, was running about like a flustered chicken. When the danger had passed and folk had begun to disperse, Kozłowa came up to her, hands on hips, and cried with a sneer:

'See, the Lord Jesus has fixed you, Mrs Voyt, he has! For the wrongs done me!'

And it would have ended in a fight, as the Voyt's wife sprang at her, nails at the ready. Antek was barely in time to separate them and so berated Kozłowa that she retreated to her cottage like a whipped dog, able only to growl, though she barked again:

'You be uppity, Mrs Voyt, uppity as you like. I'll pay you back with interest yet.'

But no one was listening. The barn had now burnt down; they heaped the smoking cinders with mud and went off to their houses, and just the Voyt's wife was left, lamenting to Antek, who listened as patiently as he could, then, waving aside the rest of her complaints, he departed.

The storm had passed to the woods and forest. The sun came out, a flock of white clouds trailing across the sky, and the birds began to sing. The air was fresh and cool, and people came out to drain the water and fill any breaches.

Almost back at his cottage, Antek unexpectedly ran into Jagusia, who was walking along with a basket and mattock. He greeted her eagerly, but she glared at him like a wolf and passed him without a word.

'Haughty!' he muttered crossly, and spotting Józka in the farmyard, he rebuked her sternly for wandering about in the damp.

The girl had recovered enough to be able to lie for whole days in the orchard. The spots had cleared up splendidly and dried, leaving not a trace, and Jagustynka continued to smear her with the paste on the sly since Hanusia frowned on so great an expenditure of butter and eggs.

And so she lay, slowly getting better and mostly alone for days at a time, for Witek had returned to the cows. A friend would drop in for a quick chat sometimes, or Rocho would sit with her briefly, or old Agata would come, telling the same thing over and over: how she would surely die during the harvest, at the Kłab's, inside the house and in a farmerly fashion. But mainly she stayed with the ever-vigilant Łapa and the stork, which came when called, and with the birds who flew down for crumbs of bread.

One day, when there was no one at home, Jagusia looked in on her, bringing a handful of caramels, but before Józka could thank her, Hanka's voice resounded somewhere and Jagna ran away in fright.

'May they bring you good health!' she called through the fence and vanished.

She was rushing to her brother's, bringing him something hidden at her breast. She found Nastusia next to a cow slurping from a pail. Szymek was putting up an outhouse and whistling loudly.

'Have you got a cow already?' She was mightily surprised.

'We have! Isn't she a beauty?' Nastusia exclaimed with pride.

'Fine cow, must be a manor one. When were you after buying it?'

'It's our cow right enough, but we never bought it! When I tell you everything, you'll slap your head and not believe me! It were yesterday. I felt at dawn that something were rubbing against the quoins and, since the hut were shaking, I thought to myself: they're driving stock to the pastures and some pig's come up to rub the mud off. I lay back down and hadn't dropped off yet and here's something bellowing softly again. I go out and I look and there's a cow tied to the tree, a clump o' clover lying in front of her. Her udders were full and she were stretching her snout out to me. I rubbed my eyes – I thought the sleep's clouding 'em still, but no, a real live cow were standing there, mooing and licking my fingers. Aye, I were sure she'd got away from the herd, and Szymek said: "They'll be right after her in a minute!" The only thing that got me guessing were that she were tied. I mean, she didn't tie herself up, did she? Anyroad, noon comes and no one's been for her, so I milk her to ease her because the milk's leaking from her udders. Evening comes, night passes. I ask in the village, I even asked the manor shepherd – no one knew of any cow gone missing. Old Kłab said it could be some robber's business and it were best to take the cow to the chancellery! Well, I were sorry, but too bad. Then in the afternoon Rocho comes and says:

"You're honest and in need, so the Lord Jesus has blessed you with a cow."

"Oh aye, cows fall from heaven for sure. Even a fool won't believe that," I say.

'He laughed at that and on parting he says:

"The cow's yours, never fear, no one's going to take her away!"

'I realize she's from him, so I fall to his feet to thank him, but he pulls away.

"And if you should meet Pan Jacek," he says smiling, "don't you go thanking him for the cow or he'll take a stick to you. He doesn't like thanks!"

'So Pan Jacek gave the cow!' said Jagna.

'If there were only another that good to poor folk!'

'True, after all he gave Stacho wood for the house, and he's always helping!'

'He's a holy man for sure. I say a prayer for him every day now!'

'As long as someone don't steal your little beast.'

'What, steal my cow! Jesus, I'd tear my eyes out! Why, I'd search for her everywhere in the whole wide world! The Lord Jesus won't allow a wrong like that! I'll bring her into the room at night, till Szymek builds a byre. Jasiiek's Kruczek'll watch my little beast too! My dearest joy, my darling!' she whispered, hugging the cow's neck and kissing her snout until she gave a moan and the dog began barking joyfully, the chickens clucked away in alarm and Szymek whistled even louder.

'It's clear the Lord Jesus has blessed you all right,' Jagusia sighed, as though with quiet regret, observing them both closely. They seemed changed beyond recognition. Szymek confounded her most of all. Why, she'd known him only as a clodhopper who could barely count to three. He'd been a pushover in the house, and anyone who wanted could order him around, whereas now he seemed quite different, was canny in all his doings, bore himself proudly and talked smart too.

'Which are your fields?' she asked after long reflection.

Nastusia began showing her, telling what they were going to sow and where.

'Where'll you get the seed?'

'Szymek says that what must be will be, and he don't speak idle words.'

'He's my brother but it's like you're talking about a complete stranger.'

'And he's that honest, and clever, and hard-working, there can't be another like him in all the world,' Nastusia declared passionately.

'For sure,' she repeated sadly, 'and whose are those mulched fields?'

'Antek Boryna's! They're not working 'em yet. Apparently they're waiting for the divisions after Maciej.'

'There'll be half a volok, well! Things are going pretty well for them.'

'Well, may the Lord Jesus give 'em ten times more. Why, Antek stood surety with the squire for our land, and he's helped us plenty besides.'

'Antek did! For Szymek!' She stopped dead with amazement.

'And Hanka's not far behind. She gave me a sow, still a piglet, but it'll be such a joy, for it's a fertile sort.'

'What's this you're blathering. Hanka gave you a sow, fancy!'

They returned to the cottage and Jagusia, retrieving ten roubles from her handkerchief, pushed them into Nastusia's hand.

'Take these few groszy. I couldn't before because the Jew hadn't paid me for the geese.'

They thanked her with all their hearts, and she said on parting:

'Just wait: Mother will come round, and then she'll give something.'

'I don't need it. Let her line her coffin with the wrongs she's done me!' Szymek burst out so suddenly and with such vehemence that Jagna went away without a word.

She set off for home deep in thought, sad and unsettled somehow.

'And what about me! A dry stick no one cares about.' She sighed despondently.

About halfway along she met Mateusz, who was hurrying to his sister's, but he turned back to walk with her and listened carefully to her account of the pair.

'Not everyone has it so good,' he said morosely.

The conversation faltered, he kept sighing and scratching his head worriedly, while Jagusia gazed at Lipce, all aglow in the sunset.

'Hej, how narrow and stifling this world is,' he said as though to himself.

She looked at him questioningly.

'What's up? You're frowning like you've swallowed vinegar.'

He began complaining how tedious he found life and the village and everything and would surely leave and go wherever his eyes led him.

'Get married, then. That'll be a change for you,' she joked.

'If only the one that I've in mind wanted me.' He looked into her eyes insistently, but she turned her head away, both reluctant and confused.

'Ask her! Any of them would have you, and there's several waiting for the matchmakers.'

'And if she turns me down! There'll be shame and vexation.'

'Then you can send vodka to the next one.'

'I'm not of that kind. If I'm set on one, I'm not drawn to another.'

'Each one smells just as sweet to a man and he'd be glad to be familiar with any.'

He did not defend himself but started on a different tack.

'You know, Jaguś, the lads are just waiting for the time when they can send round the vodka to you.'

'They can drink 'emselfs stupid, I'll not go with any of 'em!' she declared so forcefully that he was taken aback. She spoke sincerely, since not a single one seemed nicer than any other – aye, except for Jasio, but Jasio ...

She sighed deeply, surrendering to the thought of him with delight, so that Mateusz, baffled, turned back to his sister's. Jagna, meanwhile, wondered anxiously as she gazed unseeingly ahead:

'What might he be doing now, what?'

She started suddenly as someone caught hold of her unexpectedly and squeezed her.

'You'll not run away from me now,' the Voyt whispered avidly.

She broke free of his grasp, infuriated.

'If you touch me one more time, I'll scratch your eyes out and raise such hell the whole village will come running.'

'Quiet, Jaguś. Why, I've brought you a gift!' He pushed some beads into her hands.

'You can stick 'em you know where! Your gifts are as much to me as a broken stick!'

'Jagusia, what's this carry-on, what!' he stammered, astonished.

'What? You're a swine, that's what! And don't you dare bother me.'

She ran off, enraged, and burst into the cottage like a storm. Her mother was peeling potatoes and Jędrzych was milking the cows in the farmyard, so she promptly set about the evening chores, but she was shaking with anger and unable to calm down. As soon as it grew dark, she went out again.

'I'll look in at the organist's,' she said to her mother. She went there often now, to help in various ways and just to hear them speak of Jasio. Hungry for word of him, she flew there with a quiet hope of hearing something new today.

Soon lights could be seen flaring through the darkness from Jasio's room, where Michał was writing something now beneath the hanging lamp. The organist and his wife were sitting in front of the house in the cool.

'Jasio is coming tomorrow afternoon!' The organist's wife greeted her with the news, at which it was a wonder Jagna didn't drop down dead. Her legs gave way beneath her, her heart thumped so she could barely breathe, she was all on fire and trembling. After sitting down a moment for appearances' sake, she fled as though pursued, right to the poplar road, by the forest ...

'Dear Jesus!' the girl burst out in gratitude, stretching out her hands, tears streaming from her eyes. Joy sang within her, making her want to laugh and shout and fly off somewhere, to kiss the trees and nestle amid the sleepy fields in the moon's glow.

'Jasio's coming, he's coming,' she whispered from time to time, taking off suddenly like a bird and hurtling along, transported with all the force of expectation and longing, as though to meet her fate and boundless happiness.

It was late evening by the time she headed back. Windows were dark already. The only light was at the Borynas', where quite a few folk had gathered, and she went home to wait for tomorrow and dream of Jasio's return.

But in vain did she toss from side to side. As soon as her mother was snoring, she got up quiet as quiet and, wrapping herself in her apron, sat in front of the house, waiting for sleep or for dawn, whichever came first. At the Boryna cottage, beyond the pond, the lights were still on at one side and the muffled sound of conversation could be heard.

At first, she stared at the trembling reflection of light on the water and forgot everything, lost in a hazy shimmer of thoughts that wove around her like cobwebs and soon bore her away to some quiet evening and a rosy dusk, into a wide world of unappeasable longing.

The moon had faded now and a tawny mist enveloped the fields. The stars shone high and sometimes one would fall with such speed and so terribly far away that the breath caught in her breast and a shiver ran through her bones. At times a warm breeze brushed her caressingly, like the touch of beloved hands, while at other times the fields breathed a hot sigh, heavy with fragrance, stirring her heart so that she tensed, spreading out her arms. Or she simply sat musing, plunged in ineffable sweetness, like a shoot drawing up sap and stretching ... and the night stepped around her quietly and carefully, as though not wishing to disturb this moment of human happiness.

At the Borynas' the lights shone still and Witek kept careful watch over the road so that no one uninvited would overhear, since they had come together for a friendly quiet parley before tomorrow's meeting at the chancellery to which the Voyt had summoned all the Lipce farmers.

It was dim inside the chamber. A candle-end smoked faintly at the eaves and only a few heads could be recognized in the crush, for around twenty peasants had come together, all of them siding with Antek and Grzela.

Rocho, sitting somewhere in the gloom, was explaining broadly what it would mean for the village if they agreed to a school being opened in Lipce, and then Grzela instructed each one individually, advising what he should say to the prefect and how to vote.

They deliberated late into the night, for it did not pass without quarrels and opposition, but in the end they agreed on a single course and before dawn they dispersed hurriedly, since they had to set off quite early the next day.

Only Jagusia remained on the earth bench still, now completely lost in musings and the night. She sat blind and deaf to everything, whispering ardent words from time to time like an endless prayer:

'He's coming, he's coming!'

And she bowed instinctively, as though to the morrow, as though wishing to see what this dawn breaking grey over the earth might be bringing her, surrendering herself with fear and joy to whatever might come.

CHAPTER 8

It was nearly noon. The sweltering heat was building and all the folk were gathered now before the chancellery, but still the prefect hadn't arrived. Again and again, the notary came to the threshold to peer along the wide road lined with crooked willows, shielding his eyes with his hand, but there was nothing to be seen except the puddles left shining from yesterday's downpour, some late cart rolling slowly past or here and there the white flash of a peasant's capote between the trees.

The crowd waited patiently, all except for the Voyt, who darted about like a cat on hot bricks, watching the road and hurrying the peasants more and more loudly as they laboured to fill the holes and dips in the square in front of the chancellery.

'Faster, boys! For God's sake, so long as we're done before he arrives.'

'Mind you don't pee yourself with fright,' a voice piped up from the throng.

'Shift yourselves, people! I'm here on official business, it's no time for jokes.'

'A voyt, it's known, fears God alone!' said one of the Rzepki lot with a laugh.

'Next one to shoot his mouth off, I'll have 'im arrested,' the Voyt shouted fiercely and rushed off to look out from the graveyard, which was on the hill where the chancellery also perched.

Massive ancient trees spread their boughs above. The grey church tower could be seen through their branches, while the dark arms of crosses projected over the stone wall above the roofs and road leading through the village.

Spying nothing, the Voyt stationed a soltys with the people in the square while he himself went into the chancellery, where someone was constantly coming in and out, as every so often the notary would summon one of the farmers, quietly remind him of taxes owed, unpaid dues for the court building or something more besides. Indeed, such reminders were not to anybody's taste, but they listened, sighing, for what could they do now, during a harsh preharvest? Could they pay, when plenty lacked enough even for salt? So they simply bowed from the waist, one or two even kissed his hand, while some pushed a last zloty into his fist, and all whined equally about waiting until harvest or the next fair.

A smart and cunning piece of work, the notary fleeced folk until the pips squeaked. While he was quick to make all kinds of promises, before you knew it he'd be threatening one man with the gendarmes, pulling the wool over the eyes of the next, in cahoots with yet another, and conning everyone out of something. Here he was short of oats, there he needed young goslings for the prefect, or he'd be hinting at a bit of straw for rope. Happy or not, people would promise whatever he wanted, while he would take his acquaintances to one side as each of them finished their business that day and advise them, seemingly in friendship.

'Approve the school, for if you start to squabble, the prefect might get cross and it could end with him ruining your accord with the squire over the wood,' he warned the Lipce folk.

'How's that? We're making an agreement in goodwill!' said Ploszka.

'True, but don't you know: nobles ever in cahoots, peasants ever get the boot.'

Ploszka departed greatly worried. The notary, meanwhile, went on summoning people, from a different village each time, giving each one fresh cause for alarm, and urging all of them to do the same, a message that spread through the crowd in a flash.

A sizeable throng had gathered, for over two hundred peasants had arrived. At first they stood in separate groups according to village, each to his own, so it was easy to see who was from Lipce and who from Modlica, who'd come from Przylęk and who from Rzepki, for each village had its own distinctive style of dress, but as soon as news spread that they must vote for a school at the behest of the prefect himself, they began to mix, crossing from group to group and keeping company according to their fancy. Only the Rzepki gentry kept apart, eyeing the peasants truculently and proudly, though they were in fact such poor wretches it was joked they were three to a cow's tail. The rest of the folk, meanwhile, were jumbled together like pea straw, scattered all about the square, and a good many were sheltering in the shade of the graveyard and by the carts.

Most were squeezed beside the great inn that stood opposite the chancellery in a clump of trees, as though in a shadowy grove. There they flocked most readily, for though a fresh breeze was rocking the fields, a cruel heat was rising all the same and it was getting hotter, so that many a one was gasping for breath and sought to cool down with a beer. The inn was overflowing as a result and folk stood under the trees in groups, talking quietly and discussing the news, while keeping a keen eye on the chancellery and the notary's home on the other side of the house where the hubbub and bustle were growing louder.

From time to time, the notary's wife would thrust her fat face through the window and shout:

'Hurry up, Magda! Break a leg, you dimwit!'

The lass pounded through the rooms until the floor shook and the windowpanes hummed. Some child began to shriek its head off, while from behind the house rose the clucking of startled hens, and a breathless lackey began chasing the chicks scampering into the crops and road.

'Looks like they're expecting to entertain the prefect,' someone remarked.

'I hear tell notary brought in a wagonload o' drink yesterday.'

'They'll get as pissed as last year.'

'Well, can't they afford it – don't folk pay 'em plenty of taxes and no one checks their pockets,' declared Mateusz.

Just then someone cried:

'Quiet there! The gendarmes have come.'

'Lurking like wolves – you can barely mark when nor whence they come.'

They fell silent nervously all the same, since the gendarmes were sitting down before the chancellery, surrounded by a mass of people, including the Voyt and the miller. The blacksmith too was hovering a little way off, listening keenly.

'Miller's fawning like a hungry dog!'

'He's ever dearest who is feared the most!'

'If the gendarmes are here, then the prefect's not far off!' called Grzela, the Voyt's brother, and went to join Antek, Mateusz, Kłab and Stacho Ploszka where they stood talking together. They dispersed among the crowd, hailing people and explaining something important so that everyone listened intently, with just a sigh and a worried scratch of the head at times or, whipping their eyes towards the gendarmes, gathering ever more tightly together.

Leaning against a quoin of the inn, Antek spoke briefly, firmly and with command, while in another group under the trees Mateusz held forth with jokes, so that several were in fits of laughter. In a third group, by the graveyard, Grzela spoke as cleverly as though he were reading from a book, so that it was hard to grasp what he was saying.

All three urged the same: to heed neither the prefect nor those who always stood with the officials, and to vote against the school.

Folk listened attentively, rocking this way and that, like a forest swept by a rough wind. No one spoke up, they only swayed, nodding their heads, since even the most stupid understood that there'd be no benefit from a new school other than new taxes to pay, which no one was in a hurry to do.

But disquiet grew among the crowd; they shifted from foot to foot, began clearing their throats and coughing, and no one knew yet what to do. True, Grzela talked wisely and Antek spoke straight to the heart, but it was terrifying to oppose the prefect and dispute with officials. They glanced at one another, each racking his brain, but all looking to the richer ones. The miller and the first farmers from other villages kept to one side, however, standing as though deliberately in plain view of the gendarmes and notary.

Antek approached them too, but the miller snarled, 'Anyone with sense knows how to vote,' and turned to the blacksmith, who agreed with every opinion, but moved restlessly among the crowd, sniffing out what was brewing. He paused by the notary, chatted with the miller, offered Grzela baczy and hid his intentions so well it was never really clear with whom he stood.

But the majority were inclining towards a vote against the school. Scattered about the square despite the noonday swelter, they were debating more boisterously and fiercely all the time when the notary called through the window:

'Get over here, one of you!'

But no one moved, as though they hadn't heard.

'One of you nip over to the manor for fish. They were meant to send it this morning, but nothing's arrived! Quick sharp!' he thundered imperiously.

'We didn't come here to run messages,' called a bold voice.

'Let him go himself, loath to shift his belly,' someone said with a laugh, since the notary had a middle like a drum.

The notary just cursed. A moment later the Voyt emerged from the yard, made his way past the inn and dashed off round the back of the village towards the manor.

'He's changed and wiped the backsides of Mrs Notary's kids, so now he's gone off to air himself.'

'Oh aye, Mrs Notary don't like a reek in her rooms.'

'She'll have him taking out the chamber pot afore long.'

So each of them joked.

'Aye, odd there's no sight of the squire yet,' someone wondered, but the blacksmith responded with a sly smile:

'He's got too much sense to show up!'
They looked at him questioningly.
'Aye, he's not going to risk falling foul of the prefect. Besides, he shan't be voting for a school – think how much he'd have to pay for it! Shrewd he is!'
'But you're with us, Michał, aren't you, eh?' Mateusz confronted him.
The blacksmith wriggled like a worm caught under a shoe and, muttering something, began to squeeze through to the miller, who had joined the peasants and was telling old Płoszka something in a loud voice so that others could hear too:
'And I'm saying to you: vote as the officials want. A school's needed and even the worst will be better than none. And the kind you've in mind they won't give. Too bad, you can't break through a wall with your head. If you won't approve it, they'll put it up without your permission.'
'If we don't give the money, what'll they build it with?' someone from the group spoke up.
'Idiot! They'll take it themselves, and if you don't give it willingly they'll sell your last cow and you'll end up under arrest for resisting! Understand! This isn't a matter for the squire.' He turned to the Lipce folk. 'It's no joke with the prefect. I'm telling you, do as they say and thank God it's no worse.'
They nodded, of the same opinion themselves, whereas old Płoszka, after long deliberation, unexpectedly declared:
'You speak right. Rocho has misled the folk and is pushing us toward ruin.'
At which a farmer from Przyłek stepped forward and said loudly:
'Because Rocho stands with the gentry and that's why he's setting people against the officials!'
They shouted him down from every side, but the peasant was not to be cowed and as soon as the noise subsided, he raised his voice again:
'And stupid folk help him! I've said my piece!' He cast his shrewd eyes about. 'If it's not to someone's taste, let him stand up. I'll repeat it to his face. You fools! Don't you know it's always been this way, the gentry rebelling, inciting the folk, leading them to misfortune, but when it comes to paying, who pays? The peasants! And when they billet Cossacks in your villages, who'll take the strokes of the whip? Who'll suffer? Who'll they throw in the slammer? Why you, the peasants! Gentry won't speak for you then, no. They'll deny the lot of it, like Judases, and what's more they'll be entertaining the officials at their manors.'
'What are folk to them, aye, other than necks under the yoke!'
'They'd bring back serfdom tomorrow if they could!'
So the cries arose.
'Grzela says,' the peasant continued, 'let them teach our speech, and if they won't, don't approve the schools, don't give 'em a grosz, oppose 'em. Aye, it's all very well for the hired hand to shout at the farmer, "I'll not work, you can kiss me you know where", and run away to avoid punishment. But the folk cannot run away and will take the stick for their revolt, aye, for there's no one else offering up their backs for it ... So I say to you, it'll end up cheaper to set up the school than to oppose the officials. And as for teaching our tongue, true, they won't, but they won't turn us into Russkis on account of it, for no one'll say their prayers at home other than how their mothers taught 'em! One more time I say: we stand with our own! Let the gentlemen bellow among 'emselfs, it's not our business. Let 'em squabble and scrimmage, they're no more brothers to us than the others. May the pox not pass any of 'em by.'
They crowded around him, shouting as at a mad dog; in vain did the miller try to defend him, in vain did some try to take his part. Grzela's supporters were already shaking their fists at him, and it might have come to something worse, but for old Pryczek shouting:
'The gendarmes are listening!'
It quietened suddenly, then the old man stepped forward and began almost angrily:
'Gospel truth! Let's look to our own good! Quiet you, ha, you've had your say – let someone else have his! They scream blue murder and think 'emselfs that smart! Aye, if there were good sense to be found in shouting, then any loudmouth would do more of it than the priest himself! You laugh, you scum, but let me tell you how it was in the years when the gentry revolted. I well remember how they bamboozled and swore that when there were a Poland, they'd give us freedom, and land and forests, and everything! They promised, they talked, but it were another who gave what we have now, and had to punish 'em besides, since they were loath to ease folk's lot one bit! You listen to the gentry, if you're stupid, but I'll not have the wool pulled over my eyes. I know what that Poland of theirs means: nothing but serfdom, oppression and a whip to your back! I still ...'
'Oh, someone shut his mouth for 'im,' a voice broke out.
'And now,' Pryczek continued, 'I'm as much a gentleman as any other. I have my rights and no one dares touch me! What's Poland to me, what I've got is good enough ...'
He was interrupted by sneering voices, pounding from all sides like hail:
'A pig grunts when it's content and boasts of its sty and its full trough!'
'And that feast ends with a club to the head and a knife to the throat!'
'A gendarme beat him up at the fair and he's saying no one dare touch him.'
'Drives on and understands as much as a horse's tail!'
'Mighty gentleman, got his freedom, aye, even his fleas walk freely!'
'Aye, the straw stuffed in his boots has got as much to teach as 'im.'
'He can't check a hen's behind and he's giving speeches here, the old sod! Idiot!'
Greatly angered, the old man said:
'Scum! No respect even for a grey head!'
'Should we heed every grey mare just for its grey hair, eh?'
They all burst out laughing and began to turn away, raising their eyes to the roof of the chancellery, where the lackey had climbed and was looking into the distance, holding on to the chimney.
'Józek, close your mouth or something'll fly in!' they shouted, laughing at him, since a whole flock of doves was wheeling around his head, but he suddenly yelled:
'He's coming! He's coming! He's at the Przyłek turning!'
The crowd began to gather by the house, pressing more closely together as they patiently watched the still-empty road.
The sun had just moved to the side a little, beyond the roof's ridge, so that more shade was cast from the eaves, under which a green-covered table stood, with a crucifix in the middle. A red-haired, pudgy assistant was carrying papers to the table and constantly fiddling with his nose.
The notary quickly began to get dressed in his Sunday best, and once again the whole house rang with the shouts of his wife, the clink of plates, the clatter of objects being shifted and the sounds of rushing about, while in the space of a Hail Mary the Voyt turned up. He stood on the threshold, out of breath, sweaty and red as a beet, but now wearing his chain.¹ Casting his eyes over the crowd, he shouted sternly:
'Quiet, you people – it ain't the inn!'
'Piotr, come over, I've something to tell you!' Kłab called to him.
'Ha, there's no Piotr here, only an official!' he retorted haughtily.
They immediately pounced upon these words with such mirth they were shaking with laughter, when all at once the Voyt cried ceremoniously:
'Make way for the prefect!'
A carriage had appeared on the road and, bouncing over the holes, it pulled up before the chancellery. The prefect raised his hand to his brow. The peasants removed their hats and a silence fell. The Voyt and notary both leapt forward to help him out of the carriage, while the gendarmes stood by the doors, straight as staffs.
The prefect allowed them to help him down and relieve him of his white coat. Turning round, he swept his eyes over the assembled crowd, smoothed his yellow beard, frowned and gave a nod before entering the house, into which the notary was ushering him with a low bow.
The carriage drove off and the peasants again pressed close around the table, understanding that the meeting would shortly begin, but a good Hail Mary went by and a whole prayer besides, and the prefect did not appear. Laughter and glasses clinking were the only sounds that came from the notary's rooms, along with some tasty aromas that tickled the nostrils.
And since waiting had grown tedious and the sun was scorching even more, one or two began to move stealthily towards the inn, until the Voyt cried:
'No wandering off! Anyone missing will be noted and fined ...'
Well, they all held back a little longer, though cursing more luridly and glancing impatiently at the notary's windows, which someone had closed and drawn the curtain across to stop them looking in.
'They're ashamed of guzzling in front of our eyes!'
'Just as well. It'd only set our throats working with nothing but our own spit to swallow!' they muttered.
From the lock-up, which stood next to the chancellery, came a long piteous bellow, and a moment later a lackey emerged, pulling a hefty calf on a rope that was resisting with all its might. Suddenly it butted him with its head, sending the fellow bouncing to the ground, then flicked its tail and raced off in a cloud of dust.
'Catch him, the miscreant! Catch him!'
'Salt his tail, he'll soon be back!'
'Cheeky beggar, runs away from the lock-up and lifts his tail at Mr Voyt!'
They taunted the lackey, who chased after the calf and drove him back into the yard with the help of the Soltys. They had barely caught their breaths when the Voyt ordered them to sweep out the lock-up, overseeing it himself, hurrying them and lending a hand, afraid that the prefect might fancy taking a peep.
'Needs airing, Voyt, so's he don't sniff out what kind of prisoner there's been.'
'Never fear: a few vodkas and he'll completely lose his sense of smell.'

The caustic quips kept coming and soon the Voyt's eyes were flashing and he gritted his teeth, but they tired even of jokes in the end. So sick and tired were they of the sun and their hunger that they moved in a body towards the trees, ignoring the Voyt's orders, to which Grzela retorted:

'Ha, folk are no dogs! You can shout till evening, they'll not come to heel!' Pleased to be out of the gendarmes' sight, he began once again to mingle with the people, reminding each one separately how he should vote.

'Never you fear!' he added. 'The law's on our side! What we approve will be, and what the community don't want, no one can force upon it.'

But people had barely settled in the shade to have a bite when the soltyses started to summon them and the Voyt came running with the cry:

'Prefect's coming out! Hurry up! Time to start!'

'He's had a sniff o' good grub and now he's on the move! We're in no hurry! Let 'em wait!'

Muttering crossly, they lumbered over to gather in front of the chancellery.

The soltyses stood at the head of their villages, while the Voyt sat at the table, the notary's assistant at his side, picking his nose and whistling at the doves, which had taken wing from the roof, startled by the noise and circling in a fluttering white cloud.

'*Molchat*?'² suddenly shouted one of the gendarmes, standing to attention at the threshold. All eyes turned to the door, but just the notary came out with a document in his hand and squeezed in behind the table.

The Voyt rang the bell and declared solemnly:

'We are beginning, dear people! Quiet there, you lot from Modlica! Mr Secretary will read concerning this so-called school! You listen carefully, so that everyone understands what's what!'

The notary put on his glasses and began to read slowly and clearly. He'd been reading for the length of a prayer to complete silence when someone yelled:

'We don't understand a word!'

'Read in our tongue! We don't understand!'

A multitude of voices resounded.

The gendarmes began to scan the crowd carefully. The notary frowned, but he now translated into Polish as he read.

It grew quiet. They listened attentively, weighing every word and gazing at him as at a holy picture.

The notary went on slowly:

'... therefore it is ordered that a school be established in Lipce which will also serve Modlica, Przylęk, Rzepki and other, smaller villages.'

Then he expounded at length what the benefit would be of all this, what proof of munificence it was, how the authorities thought day and night how best to come to the people's assistance, to support, enlighten and defend them from all evil. Finally, he summed up what would be needed for a plot with a field, how much for the building and how much for the upkeep of the school, including a teacher, and for all this they would have to approve an additional tax of twenty kopecks a morgen. He fell silent and wiped his spectacles before adding, as if to himself:

'The prefect has said that if you approve it today, he will allow building to begin this year and next autumn the children will be able to go to school.'

He finished, but no one answered, each one pondering by himself, hunched as though already bearing the weight of the new tax, until the Voyt spoke up:

'Did you hear what Mr Secretary read out?'

'We heard! Aye, we're not deaf!' came the response here and there.

'If anyone is against, let him step forward and say his piece.'

They began elbowing one another, nudging forwards, scratching, glancing at each other and at the eldest among them, but no one dared speak up first.

'Well, if that's how it is, let's approve the tax quick and get home!' proposed the Voyt.

'Well then, do you all agree unanimously?' the notary asked solemnly.

'No! We don't want it! No!' yelled Grzela and a dozen or so with him.

'We don't need such a school! We don't want it! We've had enough of taxes! No!' came the cry from all sides now, more and more resolute, loud and bold.

The prefect came out at this noise and stood on the threshold. A hush fell over them at the sight of him, and, plucking at his beard, he said very graciously:

'How are you, farmers!'

'God bless!' replied those at the front, swaying from the pressure of the crowd surging forwards in order to hear the prefect. Leaning against the doorpost, he began to say something in his own tongue but kept hiccuping.

The gendarmes sprang among the people, shouting:

'*Shapki dolo! Shapki*'²

'Be off, scum, and get out from under our feet!' someone cursed in reply.

Then the prefect, though when he spoke he was sweet as can be, finished imperiously and in Polish:

'Approve the tax, at once – I haven't time to spare.' He looked sternly into their faces and several were seized with fear. The crowd reeled, and there was a ripple of alarmed whispers.

'Well, are we voting for the school? What do you say, Płoszka! What shall we do? Where is Grzela? He's telling us to vote! Let's vote, people, let's vote!'

The clamour was growing steadily, when Grzela stepped up and said boldly:

'We'll not approve a single grosz for such a school.'

'We won't approve it! We don't want it!' shouted a hundred voices in support.

The prefect frowned threateningly. The Voyt froze and the notary's spectacles slipped off his nose. Only Grzela was not afraid. He fixed the prefect with an insolent look and was about to add something when old Płoszka stepped forwards and, bowing low, said humbly:

'Begging the illustrious prefect's pardon, if I say that, as I see it: aye, we'll approve the school, we will, but it seems to us too much, ten groszy a morgen. These are hard times, and a grosz is hard to come by! That is all I wanted to say.'

The prefect did not answer, pondering deeply, and just nodded his head from time to time as though in agreement, rubbing his eyes. Encouraged by this, the Voyt spoke up spiritedly for the school and his cronies followed suit, while the miller prattled most earnestly, ignoring the sharp jibes of Grzela's supporters, until finally an irritated Grzela called out, 'We're flogging a dead horse here,' and seizing the opportunity, he stepped forwards dauntlessly and asked: 'And what sort of school will this new one be?'

'Like the rest!' the prefect declared, opening his eyes wide.

'Well, that's exactly the kind we don't need!'

'We'll give even half a rouble a morgen for our own school, but not a grosz for someone else's.'

'What use is such a school anyway. Mine were in one for three years, and it were like water off a duck's back.'

'Quieten down, people, quiet!'

'Hark at the sheep bucking when here's the wolf about to jump on the flock.'

'Loudmouths, scum – they'll mouth new misfortune down on all of us.'

They all shouted across each other, sparking uproar, with each one proclaiming his own view and pushing others aside. Growing more and more heated, they broke into groups, and disputes and quarrels raged everywhere, with Grzela's supporters screaming loudest and opposing the school most fiercely. In vain did the Voyt, the miller and farmers from other villages reason, beg and even threaten them with God knows what. The majority grew bolder and more enraged, blurting out whatever came into their heads.

The prefect, meanwhile, sat as though oblivious. He whispered with the notary, letting them clamour their fill. When it seemed to him they'd had enough of their fruitless yapping, he ordered the Voyt to ring the bell.

'Quiet there! Quiet! Listen!' the soltyses hushed them.

And before it had grown completely quiet, the prefect's imperious voice rang out:

'There must be a school, do you understand! Listen, and do as you are told!'

He spoke sternly, but they were undismayed, and Kłab quickly riposted:

'We don't command that anyone else stand on their heads and so should we be allowed to walk on the feet that we were born with.'

'Shut your mouth! Quiet, son-of-a-bitch!' cursed the Voyt, ringing the bell in vain.

'I'll say it again: in our school, they must do their learning in our tongue.'

'Karpienko! Ivanov!' the Voyt bellowed at the gendarmes, who were standing in the middle of the crowd, but in a flash the peasants closed tightly around them, while someone hissed:

'You lay but a finger on anyone ... There are three hundred here ... mark you ...'

They parted at once to let the gendarmes through, then surged after them in front of the prefect with a dull, angry hum, puffing, cursing and shaking their fists, while from time to time someone would exclaim from among the crowd:

'Every creature has its own tongue, but only we are ordered to use another's.'

'Nothing but orders, and you, peasants, listen, pay up and sweep the ground with your cap.'

'You'll need permission to step beyond your own barn before long.'

'Order the pigs to sing like larks if you're so mighty!' hooted Antek, shaking with laughter, and then cried furiously: 'Or have 'em make a goose bellow, then we'll approve a school.'

'They demand taxes, we pay 'em; they demand recruits, we give 'em, but hands off ...'

'Quiet, Kłab. His serene highness the tsar has decreed, in black and white, that schools and courts are to be in Polish!'⁴ The tsar himself, so we'll listen to him!' yelled Antek.

'And who are you?' asked the prefect in Russian, fixing him with a look.

Antek was shaking, but spoke up pluckily, pointing to the papers lying on the table, 'It's written down there. I'm no magpie's dropping,' he added impudently.

The prefect spoke to the notary, who shortly announced that Antoni Boryna, being under criminal investigation, had no right to take part in a commune meeting.⁵ Antek flushed with anger, but before he could utter a word, the prefect yelled, '*Poshel von!*'⁶ indicating him to the gendarmes with a look.

'Don't approve it, men! The law is on our side! Never fear!' Antek shouted boldly. He left slowly for the village, glaring at the gendarmes like a wolf at a pack of curs, so that they kept an ever-greater distance.

But the crowd suddenly seethed like a cauldron. Everyone began to hold forth and shout and argue vehemently at once, so that no one could be heard, while broken curses, threats or mocking words flew through the air like stones. They roared with such passion you'd think the devil had possessed them, and no one could understand how or why it had arisen.

They wrangled over the school, over Antek, over yesterday's rain. One brought up last year's disputes with his neighbour, another vented his spleen and yet another quarrelled just for the sake of it, so that such chaos, such a racket and confusion arose, it seemed that at any moment they would fly at each other's throats. Grzela tried to calm them, and others too, but they could not overcome the madness. The Voyt rang the bell until his fingers were numb, calling them to order, but in vain. Those enraged turkeys were blind and deaf to everything when they were springing at each other, and not until one of the soltyses began slamming a stick against an empty barrel that stood under the eaves so that it boomed like a drum did folk begin to hush each other and come to their senses.

The prefect, too impatient to wait for complete silence, shouted angrily:

'Quiet there! Enough of this parley! Silence when I speak, and listen. You are to approve the school.'⁷

It was silent as the grave. They were all suddenly afraid. A chill ran through their bones, and they stood as though turned to stone, just glancing at each other, dumb and helpless, no thought of opposition left in their minds, while the prefect stood there menacingly, surveying their frightened faces.

He sat down again, and the Voyt, miller and others rushed among the crowd, urging them to obedience and stoking fears.

'Vote for the school, vote.'

'Things could go badly. Did you hear?'

The notary, meanwhile, was taking a roster of those present, so that every moment someone called out: 'Here! Here!'

The names confirmed, the Voyt climbed on to a stool and gave the order:

'Those for the school, cross to the right and raise your hand.'

Several did so, but many more remained rooted to the spot. The prefect frowned and ordered that, for the sake of justice, they should vote by name.

Grzela was greatly distressed by this, for he well understood that if each had to vote individually they would not dare oppose it.

But there was nothing for it now. The assistant began to summon them and they went up in turn, one at a time, and the notary put a mark by their name if they were for the school or a cross if they were against.

It took a long time, since there was a multitude of folk, but in the end they voted:

'Two hundred votes for the school, eighty against.'

Grzela's band raised a cry.

'Vote again! They've swindled us!'

'I said no, and he put a mark!' yelled someone, and many others affirmed the same, while the more mettlesome began to rally.

'Don't allow it – rip up the papers, rip 'em up!'

It was fortunate that the squire's carriage pulled up before the chancellery at that moment, so that, like it or not, the people had to move aside. Having read the letter that his flunky handed to him, the prefect declared solemnly:

'Yes, very good, there will be a school in Lipce.'

Well, of course no one breathed a word. They just stood there gazing at him calmly.

He signed some papers, got into the carriage and drove away.

They bowed to him humbly as he departed. He gave them not a glance, nor did he nod his head, but exchanging some words with the gendarmes, he turned on to a side road heading towards the Modlica manor.

They watched after him for some time in silence, until someone from Grzela's band said:

'Such a lamb, butter wouldn't melt. You don't expect fangs that go deeper than a wolf's and then he tramples you underfoot.'

'How else could they govern the ignorant, except with threats?'

Grzela just sighed, looked about the company and whispered quietly:

'We lost today, too bad. Folk are not used to resistance yet.'

'They take fright at anything. It won't be easy to accustom them.'

'What a man, my friend. The law is nothing to him.'

'Aye, they wrote the law for us, after all, not for themselves.'

Some peasant from Przylęk came up to Grzela and complained:

'I wanted to stand with you, but when he bored his eyes into mine, my tongue were tied and the notary wrote down whatever he liked.'

'There were that much trickery, you could contest the resolution.'

'Let's go to the inn. May brimstone strike 'em,' Mateusz cursed. Turning to the crowd, he shouted: 'People, you know what the prefect forgot to tell you? That you're mongrels and sheep. And you'll pay well for your obedience. Let them fleece you, since you're so stupid.'

They began to answer back, someone even gave him a mouthful, but they fell silent as a Jewish britchka was going by in which the organist's Jasio was sitting. The Lipce folk surrounded him and Grzela told him all that had happened. Jasio listened, responded with a word or two on this and that, and ordered the man to drive on.

The rest all went to the inn and after a second glass, Mateusz boomed:

'I'm telling you, it's the miller and Voyt behind it all.'

'True, they were the ones urging and frightening folk the most,' Stacho Płoszka confirmed.

'And as for the prefect's threats, it's as though he already knew about Rocho,' someone whispered.

'If he doesn't, they'll tell him. There's plenty around who would!'

'Where are the gendarmes?' asked Grzela uneasily.

'Went in the direction of Lipce.'

Grzela milled about the inn. Before they'd noticed, he had left and was heading for the village along the baulks, looking around carefully as he went.

CHAPTER 9

Antek looked back at the crowd like a cat driven from the milk and pondered whether to turn round, but seeing a couple of gendarmes following, he had a sudden thought. He broke off a sizeable branch along the way and leaning against a wall he began to trim it, fashioning it to his hand, with one eye on those curs who, though walking as slowly as they could, would soon draw level with him.

‘Where to, Mr Sergeant – spying?’ he accosted them derisively.

‘Official business, farmer. Maybe we’re going in the same direction, eh?’

‘I’d be delighted, but seems to me our paths are diverging.’

He glanced about quickly. Though there was not a living soul along the road, the chancellery was as yet too close, so he set off alongside, warily keeping to the fence lest they suddenly surround him.

The elder gendarme soon caught on and began to chat, friendly-like, complaining bitterly that he’d not had a bite since morning.

‘The notary denied the prefect nothing, so he’ll surely have kept some scraps for you, Mr Sergeant. They’ll not be serving delicacies in the villages; ah well, noodles and cabbage are not for gentlemen such as yourselves,’ he mocked pointedly. The strong younger lad muttered something, eyes darting, but the elder said not a word.

Antek just smiled, taking even longer strides so they could barely keep up, forced now to ignore the holes and puddles. The village was empty, as though lifeless. The sun was scorching, with only a rare glimpse of a peasant looking out, or the flash of a child’s flaxen head in the shade. Only the dogs accompanied them faithfully, with much barking and snapping.

The elder gendarme lit a cigarette and, spitting through his teeth, began grumbling that he never had a moment’s peace, day or night, nothing but work and more work.

‘Sure, can’t be easy right now to squeeze anything out o’ the peasants ...’

The gendarme just swore, but virulently enough for Antek, who’d grown tired of this dodging, to grasp his stick tighter and say outright with open truculence:

‘To tell the truth, the only profit that work of yours brings is to set dogs barking round the village, and extracting someone’s last zloty.’

And the gendarme bore that too, though he was livid with anger now, and felt for his broadsword, but only when they’d reached the last cottage did he throw himself suddenly at Antek, shouting to his comrade:

‘Get him!’

It was a poor attempt, however, for before they could seize him, he’d thrown them off like a couple of curs, leapt to the side of a cottage, and baring his teeth like a wolf and brandishing his stick, he said in a broken stifled snarl:

‘Get on your way ... You’ll not win with me ... not even four of you would take me ... and I’ll knock your teeth out like dogs besides. What do you want from me ... I’m guilty of nothing ... Looking for a fight, good ... best order a cart ahead first for your bones ... Just try coming nearer, either of you, just you try!’ he shouted, threatening them with his stick, ready even to kill them.

The gendarmes stood stock-still, since the peasant was huge, enraged, and his stick fair humming in his fists, so the sergeant, seeing this was no trivial business, tried to turn everything into a joke.

‘Ha! Ha! Capital, we got you there!’ Holding his sides as though with laughter, he turned back, though having retreated a dozen paces, he shook his fist at Antek and shrieked in a different tone entirely:

‘We’ll meet again, Mr Farmer, and have us a little talk.’

‘May the pox meet you first!’ Antek shouted in reply. ‘Ha, he were that terrified, he’s making out it were a joke. I’ll have a talk with you ‘n’ all, let me just catch you alone some time,’ he muttered, waiting until they’d vanished from view. ‘That fool, trying to set ‘em on me, thought they could take me like dogs a hare. It’s all down to my defiance, aye – the truth weren’t to his liking,’ he thought to himself. Having reached the manor orchard, a fair distance beyond the village, he sat down in the shade to rest a little since he was shaken and sweating like a pig.

A white manor house could be seen through the wooden palings, standing in a tall copse of larches. The open windows showed black as caves, and some people were sitting on the pillared porch, seemingly at a meal, for the servants were milling about them, dishes were clinking and long peals of merry laughter reached him from time to time.

‘It’s all right for some! They eat, drink and all’s the same to them,’ he thought, applying himself to the bread and cheese that Hanka had pushed into his pocket.

Antek ate, gazing at the massive lindens that edged the road, all in flower and humming with bees; their sweet fragrance in the hot sun filled him with delight. A duck quacked from a pond nearby and frogs croaked sleepily. The hushed rustling of all kinds of creatures stirred in the thickets and the sound of grasshoppers came and then subsided intermittently from the fields, but after some time everything began to fall silent, as though engulfed in the blistering sunshine. The world became mute; every living thing now hid in the shade to escape from that conflagration, all except the swallows, still flitting ceaselessly through the air.

The afternoon was churning in the heat, and the glare made his eyes ache. Even the shadows were scorching. The remaining puddles had dried up, and a hot breeze like the blast of an open stove came from the almost ripened wheat and parched fallow land.

Thoroughly rested now, Antek set off briskly for the nearby wood, but as soon as he moved out of the shade on to the road drenched in sunlight, he started, for it felt as though he were walking through white-hot flames. He pulled off his capote, but his shirt still stuck to his sweaty sides like a burning sheet of metal. Taking off his boots too, he now walked unshod, floundering in sand like hot ashes.

The gnarled little birches here and there offered no shelter yet; the rye inclined its heavy ears over the road and the flowers drooped, wilting and blinded in the torrid air. The silence of the heatwave hung suspended, and nowhere did he spot a human being or a bird or any creature and nor did a single leaf or even the feeblest blade of grass so much as tremble, as though the Noonraith had swooped upon the world and sucked all the vigour from the languishing earth with her parched lips.

Mulling over the meeting, Antek went more and more slowly, by turn roused to anger, carried away by laughter or seized with dismay.

‘What can you do with such a bunch! Any old gendarme gives ‘em a fright ... If they ordered ‘em to obey the prefect’s shoe, they would. Sheep, the beggars, sheep!’ he thought with a mixture of pity and anger. ‘True, things are bad for everyone, everyone writhes like a trampled eel and everyone’s fair gasping in penury – what are such matters to them. Ignorant folk, so down at heel they cannot even grasp what it is they need.’ He was greatly troubled for them all and sincerely concerned.

‘Like pigs, humans are. It’s hard for them to lift their snouts to the sun.’ He puzzled and sighed, and all that came of these deliberations and vexations was the sense that he too was badly off, perhaps more so even than others. ‘For only those are fine who give no thought to anything!’

He went on his way with a wave of his hand, so deep in thought that he all but bumped into a Jewish rag-picker sitting by the wheat.

‘You must be tired indeed in this heat,’ Antek spoke first, pausing briefly.

‘It’s an oven, it’s a scourge from God, not heat,’ the Jew burst out. Getting up, he pulled the harness on to his old bent body and latched on to his barrow like a leech, pushing it before him with immense effort since it was loaded with sacks of rags and wooden boxes, a basket on top of those and a cage of chickens. Added to which, the road was sandy and the heatwave grim, so though he mustered his last drop of strength and shoved the barrow, still he had to rest often.

‘Nuhim, you’ll be late for Shabbat!’ he admonished himself. ‘Nuhim, come on, push. You’re strong as a horse!’ he muttered encouragingly. ‘Nuhim, now, one ... two ... three ...’ and he’d throw himself at the barrow with a pitiful cry, push it a dozen steps and again would stop.

Antek bent his head and made to pass by, but the Jew called pleadingly:

‘Help me, Mr Farmer, I’ll pay well. I cannot go on, I cannot at all.’ He fell against his barrow, white as a corpse and barely breathing.

Turning back without a word, Antek piled his boots and capote on top of the barrow, lifted it firmly and pushed it so briskly that the wheel squeaked and the dust rose. The Jew scurried alongside, gasping for breath and chattering encouragingly:

‘Only as far as the forest – the road’s good there. Not far now, I’ll give you a whole tenner.’

‘Give over! Fool, your tenner don’t matter to me! Why, these Jews think everything in the world comes down to money.’

‘Don’t be cross. I’ll give you pretty whistles for the children, no? Or maybe thread, needles, some ribbons? No! Then maybe rolls, caramels, bagels, something else? I have everything. Or maybe Mr Farmer would like to buy tobacco? Or a glass of fine vodka I can give you? I have it, but only for friends. On my conscience, only for friends!’

He coughed until his eyes were on stalks, and when Antek slowed his pace a little, he grabbed hold of one side of the barrow and plodded along, glancing at him dolefully.

‘There’ll be a good harvest – the rye’s drooping already,’ he began on a different tack.

‘And if it isn’t, they’ll give less for it. The farmer always pays.’

‘The Lord God has granted beautiful weather, the grain’s already dry.’ He crumbled a few ears of rye and nibbled them.

‘Aye, the Lord Jesus is that indulgent, the barley’s already ruined.’

They talked in a leisurely way of this and that until they touched on the meeting, which the Jew knew about, for, looking round anxiously, he said:

‘You know, as far back as the winter, the prefect signed a contract with a foreman to build a school in Lipce. My son-in-law was broker.’

'Back in the winter? Before the approval? You don't say!'

'Was he going to ask for permission? Is he not master of his own *powiat*?' Antek began to question him, since the Jew knew all kinds of interesting things and was happy to recount them, until finally he said forbearingly:

'That's how it must be. The farmer lives off the land, the merchant off trade, the squire off the grange, the priest off the parish and the official from the lot of them. That's how it must be and it's for the best, for everyone needs to live a little. Isn't that so?'

'Seems to me that it shouldn't be a matter of each one swindling the next, but that all should live justly, as God commanded,' said Antek.

'What can you do? Each lives as he can.'

'I know that each one scrapes his own turnip and things are bad thereby.'

The Jew simply nodded his head and thought his own thoughts.

They finally reached the forest and the firmer road. Antek put down the barrow, bought a zloty's worth of sweets for the children, and when the Jew began to thank him, he grunted:

'Fool. I helped you cause I felt like it.'

He set off briskly for Lipce. A blissful coolness encompassed him. The road was so overshadowed by the canopies of the trees on either side that only a strip of sky ran down the middle and a shimmering river of sunshine glittered along the ground beneath it. The wood was old and lofty. Oaks, pines and birches crowded together in a dense, muddled throng, with a fine undergrowth of hazels, aspens and hornbeams nestling beneath against the thick trunks. Here and there, spruce groves jostled together vigorously, stretching greedily towards the sun.

Plentiful puddles were still shining after yesterday's storm and broken branches and leafy crowns were scattered about. Here and there a slender tree, pulled up by the roots, lay crosswise like a corpse. It was quiet, fresh and murky in the forest, smelling of mould and mushrooms. The trees stood motionless as though gazing at the sky, and sometimes rays of sunshine slipped through their dense crowns, creeping among the moss like golden spiders and over the red berries dotting the pale grass like clotted drops of blood.

So befuddled was Antek by the coolness and the deep peace of the forest that, sitting down under a tree, he dozed off unwittingly. He was woken eventually by the clip-clop of hooves and snorting, and seeing the squire riding past on a horse, he got up and approached him.

They greeted each other in the usual neighbourly way.

'It's a scorcher, isn't it?' the squire said, stroking his restless mare.

'Sweltering. Have to be out with the scythes in a week.'

'At Modlica they're already cutting the rye, it's nice to see.'

'Ground's sandy there, but the rye's come up quicker everywhere this year.'

The squire asked about the meeting at the chancellery and on hearing what had befallen, his eyes opened wide in amazement.

'And you raised the question of a Polish school out loud, openly?'

'I did. I practise what I preach after all.'

'Fancy you daring to come out with it in front of the prefect. Well, well!'

'It's clear as a bell in the decree, so the law's on my side.'

'But how did it enter your head to ask for a Polish school?'

'How indeed! Why, we're Poles, not Germans or some other sort.'

'Who convinced you of that?' the squire asked more quietly, leaning towards him.

'Children learn to reason even without a teacher,' he replied evasively.

'I see that Roch is not flitting about the villages in vain,' the squire continued.

'And your brother, sir. They teach folk as they can.'

He spoke with emphasis, looking him keenly in the eye. Squirming a little, the squire moved on to some other topic, but Antek deliberately returned to the matter and to various peasant grievances, complaining all the while of the ignorance and neglect in which the people lived.

'Because they won't listen to anyone! I know, after all, what efforts the priests make, how they urge them to work, but it's a waste of breath.'

'Oh aye, a sermon's as much use as incense to a dead man.'

'What's the answer, then? You've grown wise, I see, in prison,' he remarked with irony, so that Antek flushed and shot him a glance, but replied calmly:

'I have grown wise because I know the gentry are to blame for all of it.'

'Poppycock. What wrong have they done you?'

'That in Polish times their only care for the people was to drive them to labour at the end of a whip and oppress them, while they partied until they'd partied the whole nation away. Now everything has to begin again, anew.'

The squire, being quick-tempered, was incensed and shouted:

'Keep your nose out of gentlemen's business, you peasant lout, and stick to dung and pitchforks, understand! And keep your tongue behind your teeth, before it gets chopped off!'

His crop whistled through the air and he raced off, fit to set the mare's spleen rattling.

Antek, meanwhile, went his way, equally cross and irate.

'Dogspawn!' he muttered angrily. 'His lordship, son-of-a-bitch! When he had need of the peasants' favour he was everyone's brother, the scum! He's not worth a flea himself, and he calls others louts!' he raged, kicking the toadstools along his path in anger.

He was coming out of the forest now, on to the poplar road, when all at once he thought he heard familiar voices. He looked around carefully: a dusty britchka stood under the cross, nestled in the shade of the little birches, and on the edge of the wood was the organist's Jasio with Jagusia.

Antek rubbed his eyes, quite sure that he was seeing things, but no, there they stood, barely a few dozen paces away from him, gazing at each other and smiling away strangely. He was astonished, pricking up his ears all the while, but, though he could hear their voices, he could not make out a single word.

'She was coming back from the wood, he was driving along and they met,' he thought, but in that blink of an eye he felt a stab in the heart. He was suddenly gloomy and a dull, nagging suspicion tugged somewhere deep inside.

'Nowt else but they connived to meet!' But spying Jasio's priestly garb and his face so holy-looking, he calmed down, sighing with immeasurable relief. Yet Jagusia he could not fathom: why was she so dressed up just to go to the woods? And why did her eyes sparkle and look so blue? Why were her red lips fluttering so, why did she radiate such joy? He ran his hungry wolf's eyes over her. Thrusting the swell of her breasts forwards, she offered her bark basket to Jasio, who picked out the berries, ate a few himself and pressed some into her mouth ...

'Almost a priest, and wants to amuse himself like a child,' he whispered with pity and quickly headed for home, marking by the sun that it must be late afternoon.

'That scar don't hurt while I don't touch it!' he thought of Jagusia. 'And she were looking at him that greedy, it were a wonder she didn't gobble him up. Ah, let it be, let it be ...'

He shook it off in vain, however, for the scar was raw and still stung to the quick.

'And me she avoids like the plague. Aye, on with the new. Lucky she'll not get far with Jasio.' He grew even more exasperated. 'Some women are like bitches, running after anyone who whistles.'

As he sped along, he was unable to shed these bitter memories. People passed him by, but he barely noticed them. He calmed down only on reaching the village, where he saw the organist's wife sitting by the ditch, knitting a stocking, her youngest rolling about in the sand beside her and a gaggle of plucked geese nibbling the grass between the poplars.

'You've come all this way with geese, missus?' He stopped to wipe his sweaty face.

'I came out to meet Jasio; he should be here any time.'

'I just overtook him by the forest.'

'Jasio! He's on his way already?' she cried, jumping to her feet. '*Pilu, pilu, pilu!* Where are you, you pests, where?' she yelled, for the geese had unexpectedly made for the field of rye adjoining the road and were thrashing about in it busily.

'The britchka was standing by the cross and he was talking to some woman.'

'He must have met a friend and stopped to talk. He'll be along soon then. Such a nice boy, won't even let a strange dog go by without stroking it. Who was it he met?'

'I couldn't see for sure, but I think it was Jagusia.' Seeing the old woman frown a little begrudgingly, he added with a knowing laugh: 'I couldn't make her out because they disappeared from sight somewhere in the coppice ... from the heat no doubt ...'

'Heavens above! Whatever's got into your head – Jasio wouldn't hang about with that sort ...'

'She's as good as any other and maybe better!' He was sorely angered.

Hurriedly working her needles, the organist's wife gazed very intently at her stocking.

'May your tongue shrivel, you tattler, you,' she thought to herself, deeply upset. 'As though Jasio would take up with such a woman ... almost a priest ...' But then she recalled various tales of priests and anxiety gripped her. She scratched her head with a needle, determining to question him further. Antek had gone, but a cloud of dust was now billowing on the road, rolling speedily towards her. In less than a Hail Mary, Jasio was hugging her with all his might and stammering a heartfelt: '*Mamusia*, dear! *Mamusia!*'¹

'By all the saints! You'll smother me! Let go, you dragon, let go!' When he released her, she began to hug and kiss and examine him with besotted eyes. 'How they've starved you, poor little mite! So pale you are, my son! So scrawny!'

'Broth made with holy water won't fatten anyone!' He laughed, swinging his brother, who was squealing with happiness.

'Don't you worry, I'll fatten you up,' she whispered, stroking his face lovingly.

'Let's go in the britchka then, *Mamusia*, we'll be home quicker.'

'And the geese? Saints alive, up to no good again!'

He leapt up to chase them out, since they were wallowing in the rye, shelling the ears with glee. Then he sat his brother in the britchka and, driving the geese ahead of him, began telling her about the journey.

'Just look how that brat has smeared his face,' she observed, pouncing on the small boy.

'He's got hold of my berries. Eat up, Staś, go on! I met Jagusia in the woods, she was coming back from berry picking and gave me some ...' He blushed shyly.

'Boryna was just saying a minute ago that he'd met you ...'

'I didn't see him. He must have passed to one side.'

'My child, in the village people see what never happened even through the walls!' she said pointedly, dropping her eyes to her flashing needles.

Jasio appeared not to understand, for seeing a flock of doves flying low over the wheat, he tossed a stone at them and cried merrily:

'You can tell straight away from their fat bellies that they're the priest's ...'

'Quiet, Jasio, someone'll hear you!' she rebuked him mildly, dreaming of how he would become a parish priest some day, and she would settle beside him in her old age to wait out her days in peace and happiness. 'And when is Felek coming for the holidays?'

'Why, Mama, did you not know? They've arrested him!'

'Saints alive! Arrested! What's he been up to? And didn't I always say, didn't I foretell that he'd come to no good! Such a rascal, he were just right for a notary, but the miller was set on making a doctor of him! And they so preened themselves over him, giving themselves airs, and now their pride and joy's in the slammer!' She was almost trembling with vengeful pleasure.

'But it's something completely different. He's in the citadel.'²

'In the citadel? Then it must be political,' she lowered her voice.

Either Jasio could not answer, or he did not want to, but she whispered fearfully:

'Don't you get mixed up with anything, my little mite.'

'We're not allowed even to speak of such things. They'd throw us out straight away.'

'You see! They'd throw you out and you wouldn't be a priest! And I would die of shame and vexation! Lord have mercy on us!'

'Don't you worry about me, Mama!'

'You understand after all how we toil and strive to make things better for you. You know yourself how hard it is, so many at home and the incomings smaller all the time. If it were not for our little bit of land, we'd be starving, with a parish priest like ours. You know, the priest now arranges weddings and funerals with the peasants himself! Himself! It's unheard of! He says your father ripped people off! Playing the benefactor at others' expense.'

'But he really did!' he stammered diffidently.

'You what! You'll turn on your father? Your born father! If he did, then who was it for? Not for himself, but for all you children, for you, for your studies,' she protested, pained.

Jasio began to apologize, but he was interrupted by a noisy ringing coming from near the pond.

'Do you hear, Mama? The priest is surely taking the Lord Jesus to someone sick.'

'More likely they're ringing for the bees, so's they don't fly off. They must have swarmed at the presbytery. The priest pays more heed now to his bull and beehives than to the church.'

They were just approaching the graveyard when suddenly they heard a resounding hum and Jasio barely had time to shout to the driver:

'Bees! Hold the horses, or they'll take fright.'

A great swarm droned over the church square, rising in the air like a huge humming cloud. Searching for a convenient spot, it circled and then descended, streaming between the trees. The priest came running after it in just his shirtsleeves and trousers, without a hat, gasping and waving his aspergillum, while Ambrozy, stealing along in the shade at the edge of the square, rang away frantically and yelled. They ran round the square several times, not slowing up for a moment, as the bees were descending ever lower, as though intending to drop on to one of the cottages. The children were already fleeing from the walls, when suddenly the bees took wing and headed straight for Jasio's britchka. The organist's wife screamed and, pulling her skirt over her head, squatted down in a nearby ditch. The horses began to tug, the driver leaping up to cover their eyes, and the geese all flew off, but Jasio just stood there calmly, his gaze directed upwards. The swarm suddenly wheeled around him and headed straight for the bell tower.

'Water!' bellowed the priest, pursuing them at a gallop, and getting right up close, he gave them such a dousing with the aspergillum that, unable to move their softened wings, they began to settle on the bell-tower window.

'Ambrozy! A ladder, the sieve, hurry, or they'll get away! Move, you old hobbler! How are you doing, Jasio? Light up the censer – we must smoke them, then they'll calm down!' he yelled feverishly, not ceasing to sprinkle the descending swarm. In less than a Hail Mary, the ladder was against the bell tower, Ambrozy was jingling the bells, Jasio was swinging the censer, now smoking like a chimney, and the priest was clambering up and fumbling among the bees, looking for the queen.

'Here she is! Praise God, they won't fly off now! More smoke, Jasio, underneath, or they'll scatter!' he ordered, gathering the bees in his bare hands. Though they'd settled on his head and were crawling down his face, he was not a bit afraid, but chatting away to them, he kept on gathering them into the garden sieve, since the swarm was huge.

'Careful! They're excited, they could sting!' he warned as he came down the ladder, completely surrounded by a cloud of bees spinning around him with a buzz and a hum. Back on the ground, he bore away the sieve in front of him as gravely and solemnly as a monstrosity, with Jasio swinging the censer and Ambrozy ringing and sprinkling water again and again. The procession marched off to the apirary behind the presbytery, where several dozen hives stood in a separate enclosure, each one humming as though ready to swarm.

And while the priest was busy settling the bees, Jasio, mightily tired and hungry now, quietly slipped away home.

Indeed, they were immeasurably pleased to see him. Such squeals and kisses and questions beyond the telling, and when their first delight had passed, they sat him down at table and began to ply him with all manner of tasty things, pressing and urging and cajoling him to eat, so that the whole house shook with shouts and the clatter of feet, since everyone wanted to serve him at once and be as close to him as possible. It was into this uproar that Grzela, the Voyt's brother, burst breathlessly, asking anxiously if they had seen Rocho. But no one had set eyes on him.

'I can't find him anywhere,' he declared with concern, and without stopping to talk, he rushed off to hunt for him among the cottages. Right after his departure, Jasio was summoned to the presbytery. He dawdled and delayed, but knew he must go.

The parish priest was waiting on the porch having his tea. He kissed him paternally and, sitting him down beside him, said with great benevolence:

'I'm glad you've come – I'll have someone to recite the breviary with! But do you know how many swarms I've had this year? Fifteen! And lively as the old lot, some have made four hives' worth of honey already! More of them have swarmed – I told Ambrozy to watch the apiaries, but the ass dozed off and whoosh! The bees were off to the woods and forest. And the miller stole one swarm! Oh, he did, I tell you! They fled to his pear tree and he took them for his own and wouldn't hear of giving them back. He's angry about the bull, so he's taking revenge. How dare he, the robber! Have you heard about Felek already? These blighters sting like wasps, shoo!' With his handkerchief he began to wave off the flies, which kept settling on to his bald head.

'Only that they've got him in the citadel.'

'May it end with that! He had it coming, eh? Didn't I tell him, didn't I explain to him? The ass of a boy didn't listen, and now he's in a pickle! His old man's a dolt and a buffoon, but still it's a pity for Felek. He's a clever rogue, his Latin is excellent, the bishop himself's not as good. But what's the use, when there's nothing in his head, naught but tilting at windmills ... But as they say: how does it go ... aha! If it's not allowed, don't touch it, and if it's forbidden keep your distance. A meek calf gets to suckle more than one mother ... yes ...' He went on, chasing off the flies, his voice getting quieter and fainter. 'Remember that, Jaś! Remember, I tell you!' His head was nodding and he was sinking into the deep armchair, but when Jasio got up, he opened his eyes and muttered: 'The little bees tired me out! Come in the evenings for the breviary. But watch out for yourself and don't get familiar with the peasants, for who mixes with chaff will be eaten by swine! They'll eat you, I tell you – and *basta!*' He shielded his bald pate with his handkerchief and began to snore away soundly.

It seems the organist thought the same way, for when the farmhand led the horses out to pasture and Jasio jumped on to one of them, the old man called out:

'You get down right now! It's not fitting for a priest to ride bareback and hang about with the herdsmen!'

He badly wanted to go, but dismounted, abashed. Since dusk was falling, he went out beyond the gardens to say his evening prayers, but how could he collect his thoughts when some girlish song rang out nearby, and women were chattering in an orchard so that every word flew through the dewy evening air, and children were yelling as they bathed in the pond, or peals of laughter resounded, or cows bellowed, or the priest's guinea fowl shrieked piercingly and the whole village buzzed with all manner of sounds like a humming hive, so that he kept going wrong. When at last he picked up the thread as he knelt by the rye, gazing prayerfully into the starry sky and lifting his soul somewhere up into the beyond, such terrifying cries, laments and curses erupted from the village that he raced to the house in fright and great alarm.

His mother had just come out to call him for supper.

'What's happened? Are they fighting, or what?'

'Józef Wachnik has come back from the chancellery a bit drunk and beaten his wife. That woman's been asking for a good hiding for some time. Don't worry, she'll be fine.'

'But she's yelling as though she's being skinned alive.'

'It's the usual women's screams. If he were beating her with a stick, she'd be quiet! She'll get her own back tomorrow, she will! Come, my little mite, or supper will go cold.'

He could barely touch the food and, feeling travel-weary, soon went to bed. But in the morning, as soon as the sun was up, he was on his feet. He ran about the fields, brought the horses clover, annoyed the priest's turkeys and set them gobbling, greeted the dogs so that it was a wonder they didn't snap their chains with joy, scattered grain for the doves, helped the youngest to take out the cows, chopped wood for Michał, found some early apples ripening in the orchard and frolicked with the colt a little. He greeted everything with such affection as though all were his dearest friends, brothers born – even the hollyhocks sprinkled with flowers, even the piglets basking in the sun, even the nettles and weeds lurking under the fences. Hurrying after him with fond glances and smiling indulgently, his mother murmured: 'You madman, you!'

And he wandered about, radiant as a July day, bright, laughing, sunny, full of warmth, embracing the whole world with his loving soul. When the Angelus bell rang, he dropped everything and rushed to church.

The parish priest came out for the votive Mass, Jasio walking ahead in a new surplice, freshly trimmed with red ribbons. The organ boomed a lively tune, a deep voice rose from the choir, making the candles flicker, a dozen or so people knelt down before the altar – and the service began.

Though he was serving Mass, and praying fervently during the pauses, Jasio couldn't help noticing Jagusia kneeling a little to the side. Every time he raised his head, he saw her shining blue eyes fixed upon him, some secret smile playing on her parted red lips.

Right after church, the priest carried him off to the presbytery and set him to writing, so that he didn't get away to the village to visit his friends until the afternoon.

First he went to the Kłabs, since they were closest, just across the path. There was no one there, but something moved in a corner of the wide-open hallway, and someone said in a hoarse voice, 'Why, it's me, Agata!' She raised herself, spreading her hands in amazement: 'Jesus, Master Jasio!'

'Don't get up. Are you ill?' he asked with concern, and pulling up a stump, he sat down close by, barely recognizing the face, withered as dry earth.

'I'm but waiting on the Lord's mercy.' Her voice was solemn.

'What's ailing you?'

'Why nothing, death's growing in me and awaiting harvest. The Kłabs took me in, so I could die at theirs, so I'm saying my prayers and waiting patiently for the hour when the Reaper knocks and says: "Come, weary soul."'

'Why don't they take you inside?'

'Nay, why should I take up space when it's not time ... They've already had to move the calf from the hallway. But they promised that in my final hour they'll take me in, on to the bed under the holy pictures, and light a candle ... and fetch the priest ... and then they'll dress me in my best and give me a farmer's burial. Aye, I've given 'em enough for all of it ... and honest folk won't wrong a poor wretch. I'll not be troubling 'em long, after all ... and they promised with witnesses, witnesses.'

'Aren't you weary all alone?' His voice was thick with sorrow and tears.

'I'm perfectly fine, little master. Don't I see enough of the world through the door? Someone walks past, someone stops to chat, someone looks in, some even have a kind word. It's as though I were wandering about the village. And when everyone is out working, the hens scrape in the rubbish, a creature grunts beyond the wall, the dogs look in, sparrows land in the hallway, the sun shines a little before sunset, and sometimes some rascal tosses a clod, and the day flies by before a body's noticed. And in the night they come too, aye ... many a one ...'

'Who comes? Who?' He looked closely into her open, somehow unseeing eyes.

'Why, my folk who've long since passed, kith and kin. It's true what I'm saying, little master, they come ... And once,' she whispered with a smile of untold happiness and sweetness, 'the Lady came to me and says, hushed: "Just you lie there, Agata, the Lord Jesus will reward you!" It were our Częstochowa Lady, I knew her right off ... She had her crown, a robe, all in gold and beads. She stroked my head and said: "Don't you fear, poor wif, you'll be first lady of the house in the heavenly court, a grand lady you'll be ..."'

And so the old woman twittered, like a little bird falling asleep. Leaning over her, Jasio gazed as though into some mysterious abyss, where something hidden seemed to burble and babble and glimmer and something was happening that human reason could not fathom at all. He began to feel a kind of terror, but could not tear himself away from this scrap of humanity, from this withering blade of grass, which though trembling like a dying flame in the dusk, still dreamed of new days to come. It was the first time in his life that he'd seen implacable human fate up close, so it was no wonder that he was seized by grim fear. His soul contracted with grief, tears flooded his eyes, compassionate pity bowed him to the ground, and a fervent, suppliant prayer burst of its own accord from his trembling lips.

The old woman started and raising her head whispered with delight:

'Holy angel! My dear little priest!'

He stood a long time afterwards leaning against a wall, warming himself in the sun, feasting his eyes on the bright day and the life that seethed all around.

So what if some human soul was whimpering in the grip of death? The sun had not stopped shining, the wheat was rustling. High, high above, clouds were floating by, children were playing in the lane and ripening apples blushed red in the orchards. In the smithy, hammers were pounding, resounding throughout the village, someone was harnessing a cart and someone else was sharpening a scythe, preparing for the harvest. The smell of freshly baked bread lingered, women were chatting, shawls were drying along the fences, people were moving about the fields and farmsteads. Just as every day, as always, bustling humanity, deep in its struggles and cares, did not stop to wonder who might topple over the edge first.

What use would it be?

So Jasio, too, quickly shook off his sadness and went off to the village.

He sat a while watching Mateusz, who was putting up the framework of Stacho's cottage; he stood a little by the pond with Płoszkowa, who was bleaching linen. He visited Józka on her sickbed, listened to the complaints of the Voyt's wife, peered in at the smithy, where the blacksmith was sharpening scythes and notching the blades of sickles, stopped at the orchards where most of the women and girls were working, and everywhere they were glad to see him, hailing him with friendly greetings and gazing at him with great pride, for he was a child of Lipce and like kin to them all.

Not till the very end did he look in at Dominikowa's. The old woman was sitting in front of her house, spinning yarn, which surprised him, for her eyes were bound.

'I feel with my fingers and can tell if the thread's thick or thin,' she explained and, delighted by his visit, she called Jagusia, who was busy somewhere in the farmyard.

She came running straight away, though scantily dressed, for she was in her woollen skirt and smock alone, but seeing Jasio she shielded her breast with her hands and, blushing red as a cherry, ran away into the cottage.

'Jaguś, bring out some milk so Pan Jasio can cool down!'

She soon brought out a full pail and a mug, dressed now, with a scarf on her head, but so abashed that, when she set to pouring the milk, her hands shook and she grew pale and flushed by turn, not daring to raise her eyes.

And the whole time she said not a word to him, but when he was leaving she saw him to the road, and then watched until he vanished from sight.

Something in him drew her so ineffably and so carried away was she that, in order not to give in to temptation, she raced into the orchard, threw both arms around a tree and, embracing it, stood almost without breathing or awareness, covered as though in a coat of low-hanging branches weighed down with apples. She stood with her eyes closed, a secret smile lingering on the corners of her lips, full of happiness and fear at once, of strange sweet tears and delicious trembling, like that time she'd gazed at him through the window on a spring night.

But Jasio seemed drawn to her too, though unaware of it, for he'd sometimes look in on them briefly and would leave feeling strangely joyful. He saw Jagna every day now in church; she always knelt throughout the whole Mass and so very deep in prayer, as though entranced, that he was moved at the sight of her and would sometimes mention her piouness.

His mother just shrugged.

'She's got plenty to ask God's forgiveness for, plenty ...'

Jasio had a soul pure as the whitest flower and didn't understand the barb. Since she came to their house and everyone there liked her, and since he saw how pious she was, not the slightest suspicion entered his head; he was only surprised that she hadn't once been round since his arrival.

'I've just sent for her as I've a lot of ironing,' his mother declared.

And presently she came and so dressed up that Jasio was amazed.

'Are you going to a wedding?'

'Have they sent the vodka round?' one of the girls squealed.

'If anyone dared, I'd send him packing to the four winds!' She laughed, blushing red as a rose since everyone was looking at her.

The old woman hurried her straight off to the ironing. The little organist girls ran after, together with Jasio, and soon they were all so merry, howling and shrieking with laughter at any old thing that the organist's wife had to scold them!

'Quiet, you magpies! Jasio, you best go to the garden – this is no place for you to sit grinning.'

Like it or not, he took his book and went off as usual into the fields and far away, beyond the village, on the baulks, under the pear trees or on the border mounds, where he sat engrossed in reading or pondering to himself.

But Jagusia knew those lonely haunts well, knew very well, with eyes full of longing, where to find him, how to reach him, if only in her joyful thoughts. She circled him like a moth around a candle. She couldn't help herself, she was uncontrollably driven, so irresistibly drawn to him that she now completely abandoned herself to some delightful force, submitted herself to foaming waters that bore her away into some dreamlike world of happiness, gave herself up heart and soul, not even thinking on what shores she might land or to what fate.

And whether she laid down her head to sleep at night or rose from her bed in the morning, her head thrilled with a single prayer: 'I'll see him again! I'll see him!'

And sometimes, when she was kneeling at the altar and the priest came out for Mass and the organ played poignantly and the incense wafted, and the ardent whispers of prayers trembled, and when she looked up with prayerful eyes at Jasio, who, all dressed in white, slender and beautiful, hands pressed together, moved in the midst of smoke and colours reflected from the windows, then it seemed to her that a living angel had stepped down from a holy picture and was floating towards her smiling sweetly ... he was coming ... and paradise opened up in her soul. She fell on her face in the dust, pressing her lips to the spot where his feet had passed and, carried away with rapture, sang with all the might of human happiness:

'Holy! Holy! Holy!'

Often when the Mass had finished and the people had gone and Ambrozy was jingling his keys in the empty church, still she knelt, gazing at the empty spot where Jasio had been, her prayer sunk deep in the holiest silence of elation, in almost painfully brimming joy, in tears that flowed from her eyes, pure and heavy as falling grain.

Each day was a feast day for her now, as though her soul were celebrating a ceaseless cycle of solemn devotions in their never-ending joy, for when she looked at the fields, the ripe ears of wheat rang out festively for her, the parched earth rang, the orchards rang, heavy with fruit, the distant woods and wandering clouds rang, and that most holy Host of the sun, raised high above the world, and together with her soul, everything sang a soaring hymn of gratitude and joy:

'Holy! Holy! Holy!'

Hej! How beautiful the world is when seen through the eyes of love!

And how strong a person is at that holy hour! He'd wrestle with God, not submit to death, resist even fate. Life is nothing but joy to him, and even the most wretched of creatures his brother! Kneeling in gratitude at the start of every day and in blessing every night, he would always be dividing all he had among his neighbours while remaining forever rich and growing all the time in strength and love and marvellous days.

His soul soars high above all the worlds and looks straight into stars, reaching boldly for heaven and dreams of eternal happiness, for it seems to the soul that there is no limit nor barrier to the strength of its love.

That was how it seemed to Jagna at that time of her loving.

Days went by in their usual way, days of toilsome preparation for the harvest. Busying herself about her tasks, she sang like a lark, untiringly glad, and blossomed joyously like a rose in the garden, like a slender hollyhock, like the most beautiful flower on God's fallow field. She drew all eyes, so enticing was she with her bright look, laughing all the time, that even the older folk followed her with their eyes and the farmhands again began to hang about and sigh, standing in front of her cottage, but she sent them all packing.

'You can take root in the ground for all I care. All your standing about'll get you nowhere,' she mocked.

'She scorns every one of 'em! And proud as a lady of the manor!' they complained to Mateusz, who just sighed abjectly, since even he got no further than chatting with Dominikowa at dusk sometimes, watching Jagusia mill about the room or listening to her singing. He looked and listened so ardently that he went away gloomier than ever, dropped in even more often at the inn, and then made a scene back at home. Indeed, it was Tereska who bore the brunt of it, and she went about half dead with distress. Once when she met Jagusia, she turned her back on her and spat. But Jagusia, gazing somewhere ahead, walked past without even noticing her.

Tereska angrily turned to the girls doing laundry at the pond.

'Did you see how she flaunts herself! Goes past and doesn't even glance at you.'

'And dressed up like it's a feast day.'

'Why, she sits till midday brushing her hair.'

'And she's forever buying herself new ribbons and stuff,' they put in enviously, for Jagna had only to show herself in the village and the women's glances would follow her, sharp as claws and poisonous as snakes. They took their tongues to her at any opportunity, and the fault they found, God save us: they could not forgive her for dressing like no other and for being lovelier than all the rest, not to speak of how she flummoxed the men.

'It's hard to stomach the way she lords it over others!'

'Dresses up like a manor lady and where does she get the wherewithal!'

'Well, why do you think the Voyt enjoys her favour?'

'They say Antek's not mean neither,' the wives whispered in each other's ears as they gathered in the Ploszkas' farmstead.

'Antek cares as much for her as a dog for a fifth leg,' put in Jagustynka. 'There's somebody else in the picture!' She laughed so suggestively that they began to press her by all they held sacred.

She would not spill the beans, but said in the end:

'I'm not spreading rumours. If you've eyes, look for yourself.'

So from that moment a hundred pairs of eyes were fixed on Jagusia, spying ever more doggedly, like hounds after a hare.

But Jagusia, though she met those lurking watchful eyes at every step, guessed nothing. What did she care anyway, when she could see Jasio at any time and drown in his eyes?

She looked in at the organist's almost every day now and always at a time when Jasio was at home. Sometimes when he sat close to her and she felt his gaze upon her, it was a wonder she didn't faint with delight. Heat poured through her, her legs shook and her heart thumped like a hammer. And when he was teaching his sisters in another room, she almost held her breath, lost in listening to his voice as though to sweet bells, until the organist's wife observed:

'What are you listening so hard for?'

'Because I cannot understand a word of what Pan Jasio's teaching, it's that clever!'

'You'd like to, would you!' She laughed indulgently. 'It's no mean school he's studying at,' she threw in with pride, embarking on a long tale regarding her son. She liked the girl after all, and invited her gladly, since Jagusia was willing to help with every kind of work, and often brought something besides: pears, or berries, or happen even a pat of fresh butter.

Jagusia always listened to these stories with unwavering eagerness, but as soon as Jasio left the house, she too would be in a hurry, seemingly to get back to her mother. She especially loved to observe him from a distance and, hidden in the wheat or behind some tree, she would gaze at him for a long time and with such tenderness that she could not keep herself from crying.

But dearest of all to her were the short, warm nights, when, as soon as her mother fell asleep, she would take her bedding out to the orchard and, lying on her back, gazing at the sky winking through the branches, she would sink into the sweet infinity of dreams. The hot night breezes skimmed her face and the stars looked into her wide-open eyes, while voices from out of the darkness awash with fragrance, voices full of disquieting ardour and delight, the breathless whisper of leaves and the sleepy broken murmurs of creatures – like muffled sighs, like calls coming from somewhere beneath the ground, like startled chuckles – all poured their strange music into her and flooded her with heat and trembling. They snatched her breath away and drew her taut with such shivers that she rolled on the cool dewy grass, falling like heavy ripe fruit ... And then she would lie limp, brimming with some holy, fecund force, like lush grass or branches heaving with fruit, like fields of ripening wheat, ready whether for sickle, bird or gale, waiting with equal longing now for any fate that might befall them.

Such were Jagusia's brief and warm clear nights and such were her torrid scorching July days, which passed like a sweet and ever-thirsting dream.

She went about as though in a dream too, barely noticing if it were day or night.

Dominikowa sensed that something strange was going on with her. Though she could not understand it, she was content to rejoice in her daughter's unexpected and fervent piety.

'I tell you, Jaguś, God is with those who are with Him!' she repeated kindly.

Jagusia just smiled, full of quiet, meek happiness and expectation.

And one day, quite unwittingly, she bumped into Jasio; he was sitting by a border mound, a book in his hand. She could not retreat and stood before him, covered in blushes and greatly abashed.

'What are you doing here?' she stammered, frightened that he might guess something.

'Sit down, I can see you're tired.'

She hesitated, not knowing what to do. He pulled her by the hand so that she perched beside him, hurriedly hiding her bare feet under her woollen skirt.

But Jasio too was disconcerted and looked about somewhat helplessly. The fields were empty. The roofs and orchards of Lipce rose above the wheat like distant islands. The wind stirred the ears of grain a little. It smelled of warm thyme and rye; a bird flew overhead.

'It's terribly hot today!' he remarked, just to begin.

'And it were a scorcher yesterday too!' A kind of joyful fear caught at her throat so that she could barely speak.

'Harvest will start any day.'

'For sure ... aye ...' she nodded, fixing him with heavy eyes.

He smiled and tried to speak freely, almost in jest:

'Jagusia is lovelier every day ...'

'What do I care about loveliness!' She flushed all over, her darkened eyes erupting in flames, her lips trembling with a hidden smile of joy.

'And does Jagusia really not want to marry?'

'Not a bit! Am I badly off alone!'

'Don't you like anyone, eh?' he grew increasingly bold.

'Not one, no!' she shook her head, looking at him with tender dreaming eyes. Leaning over, he looked deep into that blue abyss. There was a prayer in her glance, the deepest and sweetest and most trusting of prayers, the ardent cry of an eager heart during the Elevation. Her soul fluttered inside like sparks of sunlight above the fields, like a bird singing high above the earth.

He drew back, strangely uneasy, rubbed his eyes and got up.

'I must go home!' He bowed his head in farewell and followed the wide baulk towards the village, reading his book from time to time, or casting his eyes about, but after a while he glanced back and stopped.

Jagusia was walking a few paces behind.

'It's the quickest way for me too,' she explained, somewhat startled.

'Let's go together then,' he muttered, not much glad of the company. He fixed his eyes on his book and walked along slowly, reading in a low voice.

'What's it about?' she asked timidly, peering at the pages.

'I'll read you a bit, if you like.'

And since there just happened to be a spreading tree a little way from the baulk, he sat down in its shade and began to read. Jagusia squatted opposite and leaning her chin on her fists listened with rapt attention, not taking her eyes from him.

'How do you like it?' he asked after a moment, raising his head.

She reddened and looking away she mumbled bashfully:

'I don't know ... It's not a story about kings, eh?'

He just frowned and began reading again, but slowly now, clearly, word by word: of fields and crops he read, of some manor standing in a birch grove. It seemed to be about a squire's son who'd just come home, and of a manor young lady, sitting with children in the garden ...³ And all of it in rhyme, just like in those pious hymns, as though someone were reciting from the pulpit, so that she often felt like sighing, crossing herself and crying, the way it went straight to her heart.

But it was terribly hot in that retreat where they were sitting. A thick wall of rye grew around them, intertwined with cornflowers, vetch and fragrant bindweed, and not a single breath of air was there to cool them. The sweltering silence was broken at times only by the rustling ears of grain, the sparrows chirping among the branches or a bee buzzing as it flew past, and Jasio's voice rang with a strange sweetness, but Jagusia, though she gazed at him as at the most beautiful of holy pictures and didn't miss a single word, swayed once or twice, for the heat was sapping her and sleepiness began to overwhelm her so that she could barely fend it off.

Luckily, he broke off reading and looked deep into her eyes.

'It's lovely, isn't it?'

'Aye, truly lovely ... like listening to a sermon.'

How his eyes flashed and his colour heightened when he began to talk, reading again the parts about the fields and woods, but she interrupted him:

'But any child knows that trees grow in woods and there's water in the river and that they sow the fields. Why write it all down?'

Jasio almost recoiled with amazement.

'I only like stories about kings and dragons, or about phantoms too so when you hear 'em, your skin fair crawls and it's like someone's pushed coals into your breast. When Rocho tells those stories, I could listen to him all day and night. Do you have books like that, Pan Jasio?'

'Who'd read that rubbish!' he burst out contemptuously, deeply scandalized.

'Rubbish! Ha, why Rocho read 'em, and they were printed ones.'

'He read you nonsense and nothing but deceptions!'

'Why, would they think up such wonders just to deceive?'

'Why yes, it's nothing but tall tales and invention.'

'Is it not true then about the Noonwraith and dragons?' she asked more and more sadly.

'Not true – I'm telling you, aren't I!' he replied, impatiently.

'So is it not true too how the Lord Jesus went wandering with St Peter, eh?'

He did not manage to answer for Kozłowa suddenly appeared as though she'd sprung from the ground, and stood there beside them, surveying them with mocking eyes.

'They're looking for Pan Jasio all over the village,' she said, sweet as can be.

'What's happened?'

'Why, three britchkas of gendarmes have arrived at the presbytery.'

He leapt up in alarm and almost galloped off.

Jagusia too headed for the village, but strangely downcast.

'I must have disturbed your prayers, eh?' Kozłowa hissed, walking alongside.

'Prayers indeed! He was reading me stories from a book, all in rhyme.'

'Well, I never ... and I'd marked something quite different. The organist's wife sent me to hunt ... I go rushing one way, I look about ... nothing ... something told me to glance under the pear tree ... I look ... and there sit a pair o' turtle doves ... cooing ... Aye, a handy spot ... far from people's eyes ... aye ...'

'May your nasty tongue shrivel,' Jagna exploded, storming ahead.

'And you'll always have someone to give you absolution!' Kozłowa shouted after her mockingly.

CHAPTER 10

Jagusia grasped immediately that something of import was happening in the village. The dogs were barking more vociferously in the farmsteads and children were skulking in orchards, peering out from behind trees and fences. People were returning from the fields already, even though the sun was still high, and then there were the women, gathering and talking quietly, grim concern visible on every face, and eyes full of dread and apprehension.

'What's going on?' she asked Balcerkówna, who was peeping out from around a quoin.

'I don't know, but seems the army's coming from the woods.'

'Jesus, Mary! The army!' Jagna's legs buckled beneath her from fear.

'And young Kłab just said that Cossacks were on their way from Wola,' added Pryczkówna, who was rushing off somewhere.

Jagusia quickened her steps, reaching the cottage in some alarm now. Her mother was sitting on the threshold with her distaff, a few women chattering away beside her.

'I saw 'em clear as I see you, sitting on the porch, and the sergeant inside at the priest's.'

'And they sent the organist's Michał to fetch the Voyt.'

'The Voyt! It's no small matter then, my dears. Ho, ho! Some fine tales will emerge, they will ...'

'Maybe they're here just to collect taxes.'

'Ha, why so many then, eh? Must be sommat else.'

'Surely, but nothing good'll come of it, you'll see, mark my words.'

'I'll tell you why they've come,' began Jagustynka, joining them.

They huddled together like geese, stretching out their necks and listening avidly.

'They're after signing you women up for the army!' She screeched with laughter, but no one replied except for Dominikowa, who said scornfully: 'It's always the cheap tricks with you.'

'And you're making a pitchfork out of a needle! All of 'em fair losing their teeth with terror and each one'd be happy for a bit of adventure. Gendarmes, what are they to me?'

Płoszkowa came waddling into the farmyard with her fat belly before her and away she went with her tall tales, that as soon as she'd seen the brithkas she'd had a feeling, why ...

'Quiet! There's Grzela and the Voyt running to the presbytery.'

They looked up, to the other side of the pond, watching their progress.

'Well, I never. They want Grzela too.'

But they hadn't guessed right, for Grzela let his brother go ahead while he looked over the brithkas standing before the presbytery. He questioned the drivers, peered at the gendarmes sitting on the porch and, greatly alarmed, raced off to find Mateusz, busy at Stacho's cottage. He was sitting astride the ridge, notching the top beams to mount the rafters.

'Have they not left yet?' he asked, without pausing in his chopping.

'Ah no, the worry is not knowing why they've come.'

'There's something amiss here!' muttered old Bylica.

'Maybe about the meeting! The prefect threatened us and the gendarmes have already been asking here and there who's been inciting Lipce,' said Mateusz, sliding from the roof to the ground.

'That would mean they've come for me!' whispered Grzela. Looking about uneasily, he paled and his chest heaved.

'Seems to me it's more likely Rocho!' noted Stacho.

'True, they've already been asking after him! I never thought of that!' Grzela sighed with relief but, gravely troubled on Rocho's account, added sadly: 'If they're taking anyone it'll be Rocho, for certain!'

'What, are we going to hand him over, eh? A father born, eh?' shouted Mateusz.

'Ah, there's no way to oppose 'em, no question ...'

'Let 'im hide somewhere – he should be warned, aye ...' stammered Bylica.

'Maybe it's something else, business with the Voyt,' Stacho put in diffidently.

'I'm off to warn him just in case!' called Grzela and plunged at once into the wheat field, picking his way through the gardens to the Borynas'.

Antek was sitting on the porch, hammering a sickle on an anvil. He leapt to his feet, frightened, when he learned what was up.

'He's only just come. Rocho, over to us!' he shouted.

'What's happened?' the old man asked, sticking his head out of the window, but before they'd told him, the organist's Michał ran up, wheezing badly.

'They're coming to yours, Antek, the gendarmes! They're by the pond already ...'

'For me!' moaned Rocho, hanging his head sadly.

'Jesus, Mary!' shrieked Hanka, standing on the threshold, and burst into tears.

'Quiet! We've got to do something,' whispered Antek, thinking fast.

'I'll rally the village. We shan't hand you over, Rocho!' Michał raged, breaking off a sturdy branch and glowering fiercely.

'Stop prattling! Rocho, beyond the rick and into the rye, but quick! Hide in a furrow till I call you. Look smart before they get here ...'

Rocho spun around the room, thrust some papers at Józka, lying in bed, and whispered: 'Hide them underneath you, and not a word!'

And just as he was, without cap or capote, he shot into the orchard and vanished like a stone into water, with only the rye swaying somewhere beyond the rick.

'Grzela, off with you! Hanka, get to your work! Michał, get going, and not a murmur from you!' Antek ordered, sitting down to his interrupted task. He began notching the sickle, working as evenly and calmly as before, except that he kept lifting the blade to the light and his eyes darted in every direction as the barking of dogs came ever closer, soon followed by the sound of heavy marching, the jangle of broadswords and voices ...

His heart thumped hard and his hands trembled, but he nicked the blade evenly, accurately, again and again, not lifting his eyes until they stood before him.

'Is Rocho home?' the Voyt asked, scared stiff.

Glancing over the whole group, Antek said slowly:

'He must be in the village. I've not seen him since morning.'

'Open up!' some older fellow thundered the order.

'It's open already!' retorted Antek, hoisting himself up from the bench.

The gendarmes entered the cottage, while the guards rushed off to inspect the orchard and outbuildings.

Half the village had gathered in the road, watching in silence, as they raked through the house like a heap of hay. Antek had to open up and show them everything. Hanka sat by the window, her youngest child at her breast.

They were looking in vain, of course, but they explored every corner, not overlooking a thing; someone even checked under the beds.

'He's sitting there and waiting for you for sure!' muttered Hanka.

Noticing some books on the table weighed down by a crucifix, the elder gendarme pounced on them like a lynx and began examining them intently.

'Where d'you get these?'

'Rocho must've left 'em and there they lie.'

'Borynowa's unlettered!' the Voyt explained.

'Which of you can read?'

'None. They taught us that well in school that now none can make out even the prayer books!'¹ Antek replied.

The elder gendarme gave the books to the other one, and headed for the other side of the house.

'What's this, she sick?' He stepped towards Józka.

'Aye, many a week now, smallpox.'

He hurriedly retreated to the hallway.

'Is this the room he lived in?' he questioned the Voyt.

'Here and wherever he found himself, like any beggar.'

They searched every corner, even behind the pictures. Józka followed them with feverish eyes, and when one of them approached her, she screeched deliriously:

'Hidden him under me, have I, eh? Take a look!'

When they'd finished, Antek stepped up to the elder gendarme and, bowing from the waist, asked in a humble voice:

'May I ask, is Rocho guilty of thieving?'

Glaring right into his face, the gendarme said pointedly:

'If it transpires you're hiding him, then you'll be shuffling off together, do you hear!'

'Aye, I do, but I cannot mark what it's about!' Antek scratched himself worriedly. The gendarme gave him a sharp look and took himself off to the village.

They went round several cottages, peering here and there, questioning everyone they possibly could, so that the sun had already gone down and the roads were filled with herds coming back from pasture by the time they rode away, having accomplished nothing.

The village breathed again. Everyone was talking at once, recounting how they'd searched at the Kłąbs', how it had been at Grzela's, how at Mateusz's, and how each had the best view of the goings-on and had been least afraid and provoked the gendarmes the most.

When at last they were alone, Antek said quietly to Hanka:

'Seems to me there's no way to keep him in the house now.'

'What, you'd throw him out! Such a holy man, and such a good one!'

'Devil take it!' he cursed, not knowing now what to do. It was lucky that Grzela and Mateusz soon arrived and they shut themselves up in the barn to come up with a plan in peace, since someone was forever dropping in at the house wanting news.

Dusk had long since deepened. Hanka had milked the cows and Pietrek was back from the woods when they finally came out. Antek began readying the cart immediately while Grzela and Mateusz, to throw off the scent, went to hunt for Rocho among the cottages.

They were all amazed, since everyone would have sworn that he was hiding out at Boryna's.

'He disappeared right after dinner and not a peep since!' the friends announced.

'Lucky, then. He'd have wandered to the stocks by now!'

And in a flash the news spread, as they had intended, that Rocho was gone from the village since noon.

'He sniffed it out and scarpered, taken to his heels!' they declared happily.

'So long as he don't come back. Good riddance!' said old Płoszka.

'Bothers you, does he? Done you wrong, has he?' growled Mateusz.

'Hasn't he caused confusion enough? Stirred people up enough? The whole village'll end up suffering on his account ...'

'Catch 'im and hand 'im over, then!'

'If you'd any sense, they would have had 'im long since ...'

Mateusz swore and made to punch him; they barely dragged them apart. Shaking his fist and hurling profanities, he left, and since it was now completely dark, the other folk returned to their houses.

Antek was waiting for just this moment, for as soon as the roads emptied and people were sitting at their suppers and the smell of fried pork fat drifted through the village, along with the scraping of spoons and quiet chatter over bowls, he brought Rocho to Józka's side of the cottage, not permitting the fire to be stoked.

The old man had a quick bite, gathered his things and began to say his farewells to the women. Hanka fell at his feet and Józka burst into great, whimpering sobs.

'God be with you. Maybe we'll see each other again!' he whispered tearfully, pressing them to his breast and kissing their heads like a father born, but Antek was now hastening him. Having blessed the children and the house, he crossed himself and set off for the stile at the hayrick.

'The horses will be waiting at Szymek's at Podlesie and Mateusz will take you.'

'I have one more person to look in on in the village ... Where'll we meet?'

'At the cross by the wood. We'll soon be headed there ...'

'Ah good, I've still got much to talk of with Grzela.'

And he disappeared in the murk, so that not even his steps could be heard.

Antek harnessed the horses, putting a quart or so of rye in the cart and a sack of potatoes. He took Witek aside and explained something at length before saying loudly:

'Witek, take the horses to Szymek at Podlesie and be right back! Understand?'

His eyes sparkling, the boy snatched up the reins and set off at such a gallop that Antek called after him:

'Slow down, you bugger, you'll wear out the nags!'

Meanwhile, Rocho had stealthily made his way to Dominikowa's, where he had a few things to collect, and shut himself in the storeroom.

Jędrzych guarded the road and Jagusia kept watch in the yard while the old woman listened out anxiously, sitting in the chamber.

It was a good few prayers before he came out. He chatted to one side with Dominikowa a little and, tossing his bundle on to his back, made to leave, but Jagusia insisted on carrying it for him at least as far as the wood. He did not object and after he had said goodbye to the old woman, they set off through the orchard to the fields.

They went slowly and carefully along the baulks, in silence.

It was a clear night and glittering with stars. The sleepy countryside lay in quietness except for a dog barking somewhere in the village ...

They were almost at the woods when Rocho stopped and took her hand.

'Jaguś!' he whispered kindly. 'Listen to me carefully.'

She listened intently, trembling with some ill foreboding.

He spoke like a priest at confession, reproaching her with Antek, the Voyt and Jasio most of all! He begged and swore by everything holy that she should pull herself together and begin to live differently!

She turned her face away, embarrassed, flooded with burning shame, her heart tight with misery, but when he mentioned Jasio she lifted her head proudly.

'And what wrong do I get up to with him, what?'

He began to explain, in his kindly way, what temptations they were hazarding and to what sin and scandal the Evil One could lead them ...

She did not listen, but just sighed, her thoughts flying to Jasio. Her full, shining lips whispered, sweetly, ardently, passionately, of their own accord, 'Jasio! Jasio!' Her blazing eyes seemed to soar like birds full of joyful song and circle around his dearest head ...

'Why, I'd follow him to the end of the world!' The words escaped unwittingly. Glancing at her wide-open eyes, Rocho shuddered and fell silent.

By the cross at the edge of the woods something glimmered white – figures in capotes.

'Who's there?' He paused cautiously.

'Over here! All friends!'

'My legs are flagging now – I'll rest a moment,' he said, sitting down among them. Jagusia dropped the bundle and sat to one side, by the cross, in the deep shadow of the birches.

'Let's hope no further troubles come your way ...'

'Eh ... what's worse is that you're leaving us!' said Antek.

'Maybe I'll be back some day, maybe!'

'Son-of-a-bitch, hunting a man like a rabid dog!' burst out Mateusz.

'And for what, my God, for what?' groaned Grzela.

'For wanting truth and justice for the people!' Rocho replied solemnly.

'The world is hard for everyone, and hardest of all for a just man.'

'Don't worry, Grzela. It will change for the better yet, it will ...'

'So I reckon, for it's hard thinking all these efforts are in vain.'

'Wait away and pigs'll fly!' Antek sighed, gazing into the shadows where Jagusia's pale face shone.

'I say to you, whoever pulls up the weeds and sows good grain, he'll reap when the harvest comes!'

'And if it don't grow? Happens too, don't it?'

'Yes, but each one sows with faith that the crop will double.'

'Aye, who wants to toil for nothing.'

They pondered deeply on these things.

The wind blew, the birches murmuring above them, the wood gave a dull moan and the crisp rustle of wheat came from the fields. The moon floated up and travelled across the sky as though along a road between white clouds set in rows on either side like sheaves. The trees cast shadows mottled with light, and overhead nightjars darted in their twisting flights. A sadness gripped all their hearts.

Jagusia wept quietly, not knowing why.

'What's up, what?' asked Rocho kindly, stroking her head.

'I don't even know, I feel gloomy ...'

But all of them were gloomy, their souls beset with grief. They sat glumly, their dull eyes fixed on Rocho, who seemed like one of the Lord's saints to them now. He sat under the cross, from which the heavily slumping Christ seemed to be blessing his weary grey head with his bloody hands. Rocho, meanwhile, began to speak in a voice full of confidence:

'Don't you fear for me. I'm but a mite, a single blade of grass in a flourishing field. Should they take me and destroy me, what of it, when many more remain and each one ready to give his life for the cause ... And there will come a time when thousands more will appear. They'll come from the towns, they'll come from the cottages, they'll come from the manors, and they will fall, one after another, heaping up like stones, until that holy longed-for church will rise upon them ... I say to you that it will stand and endure unto the ages, and no ill power will overcome it, for it will spring forth from the blood of sacrifice and love ...'

And he talked at length of how not a single drop of blood, not a single tear nor any effort was in vain, how always, like wheat on enriched soil, new defenders were born, new forces, new victims, until that holy day would come, the day of resurrection, the day of truth and justice for the whole nation ...

He spoke fervently, and sometimes so loftily that it was impossible to understand it all, but a holy fire swept through them, their hearts were galvanized with rapture and such faith, power and desire that Antek called out:

'Jesus ... just lead us ... and I'll go even to my death, I'll go ...'

'We'll all go, and trample whatever stands in our way!'

'Who's there to oppose us, who can defeat us? Let 'em just try ...'

So they burst out one after another, more and more passionately, until Rocho had to quieten them and, shifting a little closer, began to teach them how that longed-for day would be and what they should do to speed it along ...

He said such momentous and altogether unexpected things that they listened with bated breath, with fear and joy together, taking in every word of his with a shiver of heartfelt faith, like most holy communion ... For he opened heaven before them, showed them paradise, so that their souls knelt in delight, their eyes saw untold wonders and their hearts imbibed the sweet angelic song of hope ...

'It's in your power to make it happen!' he finished, weary now. The moon had hidden behind a cloud. The sky had grown grey and the fields hazy, while the wood murmured something quietly, the wheat rustled anxiously and the barking of dogs could be heard from distant villages. They sat mute, strangely silent, still all ears, as though drunk on his words and solemn somehow, as after taking a grave vow.

'It's time for me to go!' he said, rising. Taking each one in his arms, he embraced and kissed them in farewell. It was a wonder they did not all weep with grief. He meanwhile knelt down and said a short prayer, falling to his face and weeping as he embraced the earth with his arms like a mother he was leaving for ever.

Jagusia was sobbing away, the men furtively wiping their eyes.

And they quickly parted.

Only Antek and Jagusia returned to the village. The others vanished somewhere by the wood.

'Don't tell anyone what you heard!' he said, after a long pause.

'Do I go running round the houses with gossip!' she snapped crossly.

'God forbid the Voyt should hear of it!' he reminded her sternly.

She didn't reply and just quickened her step, but he didn't let himself be outpaced and kept alongside her, glancing from time to time at her tear-stained, angry face ...

The moon emerged again and hung right over their path, so that they seemed to be walking upon a silver baulk edged by the twisted shadows of trees. Suddenly his heart quivered. Longing stretched out its unsated arms. He moved a little nearer, nearer, so close that he had only to reach out and draw her to him, but he didn't do it, he didn't dare, and her fierce, contemptuous silence deterred him, so he just said cuttingly:

'You're rushing along as though trying to escape me ...'

'Well, it's true! Someone'll see us and there's fresh gossip at the ready.'

'Or you're hurrying to someone else!'

'Oh aye, am I not allowed! I'm a widow after all!'

'I see they're not saying in vain that you're heading for a priest's housekeeper ...'

She tore off like a gale and the tears spilled from her eyes in burning streams.

CHAPTER 11

In places, on the fields with sandy, lighter soil, they were going out already with the sickles, and even on the higher ground scythes were flashing here and there, while in the villages, where the soil was heavier, they were just beginning to make ready. The harvest was to take place any day.

In Lipce, too, a couple of days or so after Rocho's flight, brisk preparations for harvest were now under way. Hayrigs were fixed in all haste and the drier carts soaked in the pond. Barns stood wide open on both sides, ready to be tidied, and thick straw ropes were being woven in the shade of the orchards,¹ while from almost every cottage the clang of hammers rang out as the menfolk peened the scythes. The women busied themselves baking bread and readying supplies, and all of it merged in such fuss and flurry that it was as though the village was preparing for a great holiday.

Since a sizeable crowd had come from other villages, the roads and mill were teeming as at a fair. Folk were arriving mainly with grain for grinding, but to add to the nuisance there was so little water that only one gristmill was working, and even that was barely moving. They waited their turn patiently all the same, for everyone wanted to grind their grain before harvest.

Quite a throng had squeezed into the miller's house too, to buy flour, all kinds of groats and even loaves. The miller was lying sick, but clearly nothing happened without his approval, as he would shout to his wife, who was sitting outside under the open window:

'Nothing for the Rzepki lot, not even for cash! They took their cows to the priest's bull, so let the priest give 'em credit and whatever else.'

No amount of pleading or groaning helped one bit, and in vain did she stand up for the poorer folk too. He dug in his heels and would not grant credit for even a quart of flour to anyone who had taken their cow to the presbytery.

'Priest's bull has taken their fancy, so let them go milk it!' he would shout.

The miller's wife, somewhat disgruntled and tear-stained and with her face bound, shrugged, but, whenever she could, she'd give credit on the sly.

Kłębowa came up, asking for half a quart of millet groats.

'If you're paying, take it, but I'm not giving a single grain on tick.'

She was greatly flustered, for she had indeed come without money.

'Your Tomek's hand in glove with the priest. Go ask him for groats.'

She was offended and said provocatively:

'Aye, he sticks with the priest, and he'll do so still, for he'll not set foot here again.'

'The slighter the loss, the briefer the grief! Try grinding your grain elsewhere.'

Kłębowa went off, greatly troubled, for there wasn't a grosz in the house. Bumping into the blacksmith's wife sitting in front of the closed smithy, she spilled her sorrows and wept over the miller. But the smith's wife replied with a laugh:

'Well, let me tell you this: he won't be lording it for long.'

'Ha, who's going to fix a moneybags like that, eh?'

'When they put up a windmill nearby, that'll fix him.'

Kłębowa's eyes fair popped out with astonishment.

'My man's putting up a windmill. He's just gone to the forest with Mateusz to choose the wood. They're building in Podlesie, near the shrine.'

'Well I ... Michał putting up a windmill; I'd have sooner expected my own demise, well, well. Serve that money-grabber right – his fat belly can shrink.'

Spirits lifted, she hurried home the faster for it, but seeing Hanka doing laundry in front of her cottage, she stepped in to share the unexpected news.

Antek was tinkering with the cart and, overhearing the conversation, he said:

'It's true what Magda says. Blacksmith's bought twenty morgen at Podlesie right by the shrine and he's putting up a windmill there! The miller'll be livid with rage, but that'll take him down a peg! He's made everyone's life such a misery, no one'll be sorry.'

'Have you heard nothing of Rocho?' asked Kłębowa.

'Not a thing!' He turned away quickly.

'Strange – third day and no news of what's happening with him.'

'But it's been like that many a time, him going off somewhere and then appearing again.'

'Is anyone from yours going to Cześćochowa?'² asked Hanka.

'My Ewka's going, with Maciuś. Not many from the village this year.'

'I'm going too. I'm just washing my lighter clothes.'

'But seems there's quite a few from other villages.'

'They've chosen a right good time, just when there's most work,' muttered Antek, but he did not oppose his wife, having long known the intention behind it.

They were talking of all manner of things when Jagustynka rushed in.

'Guess what,' she shrieked. 'Jasiek's back from the army this hour past!'

'Tereska's husband! She said he'd not be back till potato digging.'

'I've just seen him, looking grand and sorely missing his kin.'

'He was a good lad, if obstinate. Is Tereska home?'

'Picking flax at the priest's and no idea what's waiting at home.'

'More ruckus in Lipce! Why, they'll soon tell him!'

Antek listened intently, for the news had struck him greatly, but he did not answer. Hanka and Kłębowa, sincerely sorry for Tereska, were foreseeing the worst outcome for her, until Jagustynka interrupted them:

'Nobbut a pig's ear, such justice! Ha, a young bull like that goes off years at a time, leaving his woman alone, and should something happen to the poor thing, he's ready even to kill her! And it's "Be damned!" from everyone on her account. A fine sort of justice! A man can carry on sowing wild oats in the wind and not one single ill word does anyone have for him! A stupid order of things it is! Why, is a woman not a living human being, is she whittled of wood, or what? But since she must answer for her actions, then let her lover pay just the same – they sinned together after all. Why is the fun only for him, and the weeping all for her, eh?'

'Ah m'dears, so it's been decreed unto the ages of ages, and so it will remain!' whispered Kłębowa.

'So it will, though folk go to ruin and the Evil One rejoices, but I'd order things different: should someone take another's woman, then let him have to keep her always, and if he don't want to, for a new one's more to his taste, take a stick to the scum and into the slammer with him!'

Antek laughed aloud at her vehemence, and she flew at him with a shriek.

'It's a laughing matter to you, eh? Pox-ridden thugs, every girl's the sweetest till you get your hands on her! And then you mock her!'

'You're squawking like a magpie for bad weather!' he flung at her grudgingly.

She rushed off to the village and did not return until evening, but mightily tear-stained.

'What's happened to you?' Hanka asked anxiously.

'What d'you think. I've supped human misery till I'm faint with it.' She burst into tears and continued through weeping and sobs: 'Kozłowa's taken Jasiek under her wing and given him the whole sorry tale.'

'If she hadn't, someone else would. These things don't just vanish.'

'Something terrible's brewing at theirs, I tell you! I ran over, but there were no one about. I looked in just now – they're sitting there, crying, the gifts he brought her all spread on the table. Jesus, a shiver ran down me, cold as though I were looking into a grave. They're not talking, only crying. My hair stood on end when Mateusz's mother told me how it happened.'

'Did he mention Mateusz, do you know?' Antek asked anxiously.

'God defend us how he's cursing him! Jasiek'll never forgive him, oh no!'

'Mateusz won't be begging him for mercy, never you fear,' he retorted angrily, and without further ado he rushed off to Podlesie to warn his friend.

He found him at Szymek's, where he was sitting with Nastusia against the wall. They were discussing something quietly together. Antek called to him immediately and when they'd gone some way he told him the whole story. Mateusz almost choked and began to swear.

'Thunderbolts strike such news!'

They returned to the village. Mateusz was frowning and heaving deep and sorrowful sighs.

'I see you're sad and gloomy,' Antek put in cautiously.

'I've no regrets; she were a thorn in my side anyway. Something else is bothering me.'

Antek was startled, though feeling too awkward to question him.

'There's not time enough to regret every woman! She fell into my hands so I took her. Anyone would do the same! I've had as much fun as a dog down a well, I tell you, the amount of wailing and complaining I've had to listen to, enough for ten. If I tried to get away, she'd follow me like a shadow. Let Jasiek have his joy of her. I've not got romancing on my mind, but something quite different.'

'Indeed, it's time for you to marry.'

'Nastka was saying the same.'

'There's lasses as many as poppies in the village, plenty to choose from.'

'I've long had something in mind,' Mateusz burst out involuntarily.

'Then ask me for your matchmaker and fix a wedding for right after harvest.'

This was not to his taste, for he grimaced and again mentioned Jasiek. Having learned everything from Antek, he began talking about Szymek's farm, confessing at the same time, as though reluctantly, since Jędrzych had told Nastusia in confidence, that Dominikowa was planning to go to court over Jagusia's land from Maciej.

'Father signed it over, no one's denying it. Aye, I shan't hand over the land itself, but I'll pay what it's worth, for sure! Quarrelsome biddy, got a taste for lawsuits!'

'Is it true that Jagusia gave the settlement to Hanka?' Mateusz asked carefully.

'What of it, when it's not been signed by the notary?'

Mateusz cheered up somewhat at that and, unable to restrain himself, kept bringing Jagusia into their talk again and again, praising her mightily.

Antek, marking what was coming, sneered:

'Have you heard the latest about her?'

'The old biddies are always branding her one thing or another.'

'She's running after the organist's Jasio, apparently, like a bitch,' he added, deliberately.

'Seen that, have you?' Mateusz reddened with anger.

'I don't go spying on her, I don't care either way, but some see daily how she meets with Jasio in the woods, or on the baulks ...'

'Give 'em a smack and they'd soon stop gossiping.'

'Why not try – maybe they'll get a fright and give over!' Antek said slowly, for he felt a sudden, terrible tug of jealousy over Jagna, and thoughts of Mateusz wedding her snapped at him like rabid dogs.

He did not reply to Mateusz's truculent and rather disagreeable words, if only not to betray his anguish, but on parting he could not hold back and said with a nasty laugh:

'Whoever marries her will have plenty of ... brothers-in-law ...'

They parted quite coldly.

After a few paces, Mateusz laughed quietly to himself and thought:

'She must be keeping him at arm's length and got him angry – that's why he's sounding off. Let her run after Jasio, such a child. It's more the priest drawing her than the boy.'

So he pondered indulgently, for having quizzed Antek on Maciej's settlement, he had firmly decided to marry her. Slowing his steps, he began calculating how much he'd have to pay off Jędrzych and Szymek in order to remain on the farm alone, for a whole twenty morgen.

'The old woman's nasty, aye, but she won't live to see a hundred.'

Then he recalled Jagusia's antics, which perplexed him a little.

'What's past is gone, and if she tries any more tricks, I'll soon shake 'em out of 'er.'

His mother was waiting in the farmstead, in front of the cottage.

'Jasiek's back,' she whispered in alarm. 'They've told him already.'

'All the better – won't have to tell fibs.'

'Tereska's been round a few times, threatening that she'll drown herself ... that she'll ...'

'Indeed, she might, for sure,' he whispered, frightened. Sitting down to supper on the porch, he was so worried that he could not eat, listening out for sounds in Jasiek's orchard just beyond the baulk. Increasingly uneasy, he pushed his bowl away and smoked cigarette after cigarette, struggling in vain with fits of agitated trembling. In vain did he curse himself and all women, in vain did he wish to make a joke of the whole thing; fear for Tereska grew in him all the time and tormented him almost unbearably. Several times he rose to head for the village and be among other people, but he stayed, waiting for who knows what.

Night had fallen when he heard footsteps, and before he could make out which direction they were coming from, Tereska was hanging round his neck.

'Save me, Mateusz! Jesus, I've been waiting for you so long, looking out for you.'

He sat her down beside him. She nestled against his breast like a small child and through streaming tears, through her misery, she whispered:

'They've told him everything! I'd have sooner expected death than him returning. I was at the priest's flax ... some woman comes running and tells me ... I nearly dropped down on the spot ... I came back like I were coming to meet my own death ... You weren't home ... I went to look for you ... you weren't in the village ... I roamed about for an hour, but I had to go back ... I come into the house ... and he's standing in the middle, pale as the wall ... He flew at me with his fists ... the truth, he says ... the truth ...'

Mateusz shuddered, wiping the icy cold sweat from his face.

'I confessed ... fibbing would've been useless ... He snatched up the axe ... I thought it's the end, and I said to him first: "Kill me! Unburden us both!" But he didn't lay a finger on me! ...'

Merciful Jesus, if he'd beaten me, kicked me, abused me, it would have been easier, so much easier, but he just sits and cries! And what'll I do now, miserable wretch that I am, what? Where'll I go! Save me, or I'll throw myself down the well or do something to myself – save me!' she shrieked, falling to his feet.

'What can I do, you poor thing, what?' he stammered helplessly.

She leapt up suddenly with a savage growl of maddened fury.

'Why did you take me, then? Why did you dupe me? Why did you lead me into sin?'

'Quiet, the whole village'll come running!'

Falling on to his breast again, she clung to him with her whole body, and, covering him with kisses, she waived with all the force of terror, love and grief:

'My one and only, my one in a thousand, kill me, but don't drive me away from you! You do love me, eh? Don't you? Hug me one last time, take me, hold me, don't abandon me to torment, to weeping, to ruin! You're all I've got in the whole world, only you ... Just let me stay by your side and I'll serve you like a faithful dog, like the lowliest serving girl!'

So she lamented mournfully, the words torn from the very bottom of her anguished soul.

Writhing as though in the grip of pincers, Mateusz squirmed and wriggled as best he could to avoid answering her, fending her off with kisses and caresses and nodding at everything she wanted, though looking about fearfully and on edge since it occurred to him that Jasiek might be sitting on the stile.

But after a minute or so, suddenly seeing the whole truth, Tereska pushed him away and yelled, with words that stung like a whip:

'You're lying like a dog! You were always lying! You'll not deceive me now! You're afraid of Jasiek's stick, so you're wriggling like a trampled worm! And I believed you like you were the best o' men! My God, my God! And Jasiek so kind, brought me a pile o' presents, never said a mean word to me and this is how I repay him. And I trusted such a treacherous thug! Such a dog! Go run after Jagusia!' she shrieked, leaping at him with her fists. 'Go on, find some cut-throat to marry you both – you're proper suited, a slut and a villain!'

And she fell to the ground, heaving with terrible, delirious weeping.

Mateusz was standing over her, not knowing what to do, his mother sobbing somewhere by the wall of the cottage, when Jasiek came out of the orchard. Walking up to his wife, he began to whisper tender words, bathed in tears and full of kindness:

'Come home, come on, poor thing. Don't worry, I'll not hurt you – you've paid plenty enough. Come, my wife ...'

He picked her up and, carrying her across the stile, he shouted to Mateusz:

'I'll not forgive the wrong you've done, so long as I live, so help me God!'

Mateusz said nothing. Shame choked him, flooding his heart with such bitterness, such keen distress, that he took himself off to the inn and drank all night.

The story was round the village in a flash. Jasiek's behaviour was recounted with some astonishment and much respect too.

'She'll not find another like that in a hurry,' said the women, greatly moved, while severely castigating Tereska. But Jagustynka defended her fiercely.

'Tereska's not to blame!' she shrilled in various homesteads, wherever she heard they were raking her over the coals. 'Jaśko were little more than a lad when they took him to the army. She were left all alone, with not even a child, so it's no wonder after so many years she longed for a man. No woman'd stand such a fast. And Mateusz got wind of it, like a dog, and if he don't start with his fawning and flattering and taking her where music were playing, turning her foolish head.'

'And no court neither for such deceivers,' said one woman with a sigh.

'His hair's a-thinning and still he's after women.'

'Poor bachelor, how's he to eat except at someone's else's table?'

So the farmhands all mocked.

'Nor is Mateusz to blame. If the bitch don't give, the dog won't take, don't you know!' said Stacho Płoszka, laughing, and it was a wonder he didn't get a beating for it.

But they soon stopped deliberating since harvest was around the corner, and the wealthier were already looking for hired hands.

The organist moved first, taking on a dozen or so women for the harvest. Even the organist's wife wielded a sickle, as did his daughters, while the old man kept a watchful eye over everything. Jasio hurried over but not until after Mass and had little joy of it, for his mother chased him away in the rising heat of the afternoon so that he wouldn't burn his head in the sun.

'He'll find some shade at Jagusia's. That'll suit him,' Kozłowa grunted after him.

He found it hot and dull inside, however, and the flies tormented him so tenaciously that he went off to the village. Going past the Kłąbs', he heard stifled groans coming from the wide-open cottage.

Agata was lying in the hallway by the threshold. The chamber was empty, for the whole house was at harvest. Carrying her inside and laying her on the bed, he gave her something to drink and revived her so that she came round and opened her tearful eyes.

'My end is coming, little master.' She smiled like a awakened child.

He wanted to run for the priest, but she caught hold of his cassock.

'The Lady told me today: "Prepare for tomorrow, weary soul!" I've time yet, little master! Tomorrow ... thank you, merciful God, thank you!' she moaned ever more weakly. A smile flickering on her lips, she folded her hands and, gazing as though into the distance, she sank into a deep breathless prayer. Realizing that she had begun her dying, Jasio ran to summon the Kłąbs.

He did not look in again until the afternoon. She was lying in bed quite conscious. Her chest stood beside her on the bench, and with hands that were growing colder, she was taking out everything that she had prepared for this final hour: fresh bedding and a clean sheet to place under her body; holy water; an aspergillum still in fine condition and a goodly portion of a votive candle; a picture of the Lady of Częstochowa to hold; a new smock; a fine wool skirt; a cap, amply filled at the forehead, together with a headkerchief to tie over it; and brand-new shoes. This entire funereal dowry, begged over an entire lifetime, she now spread all about her, taking pleasure in each thing and boasting of it before the women, even trying on the bonnet. Examining herself in the mirror, she whispered mighty happily:

'It will be grand. I'm looking at a fine housewife.'

She said they were to dress her in these treasures tomorrow, first thing in the morning. Indeed, no one opposed her, but tiptoed around her, easing these last moments as well as they possibly could.

Jasio sat with her until dusk, reading prayers aloud, while she repeated them after him, dozing off every moment with a faint smile.

And when they were sitting down to supper, she had a hankering for eggs, though she only pecked at them once, aye, or twice, pushing the food away immediately. She then lay quietly the whole evening, and not until they were getting ready for bed did she call Tomek to her.

'Don't you worry,' she said timidly. 'I'll not be in the way long, no indeed.'

The next day they dressed her in the morning, as she'd ordered, laid her down on Kłębowa's bed and on her own bedding, she herself ensuring that everything should be just right. Trembling, she patted down the quilt herself, poured the holy water herself on to a plate and put the aspergillum on it. Having ascertained that everything was as it should be at such an hour in the house of a farmer, she asked for the priest.

He came, bringing the Lord Jesus, and prepared her for this final journey, telling Jasio to stay until the end, for he was in a hurry to get somewhere.

Jasio sat by her and read quietly from the breviary. The Kłąbs too stayed at home, and soon Jagusia came running and crouched in a corner, quiet as a rabbit. Only the flies buzzed in the room as people moved about, silent as shadows, glancing timidly at Agata ... She lay with a rosary in her hand, still fully conscious, saying farewell to everyone who looked in at the cottage. And to the children, some of whom had crowded into the hallway or under the window, she handed out a few groszy.

'Here, say a little prayer for Agata!' she whispered with pleasure. And then for whole hours she did not speak to anyone.

There she lay, with dignity, in the country way, on the bed, under the holy pictures, just as she'd always dreamed her whole life long. She lay full of quiet pride and ineffable happiness, joyful tears welling grey in her eyes. Moving her lips a little and smiling blissfully, she gazed out of the window into the deep sky, at the vast immeasurable fields where ringing scythes were flashing already here and there as they cut down the ripe heavy rye, into some distant place visible only to her dying soul.

But at a certain moment, when the day was nearing its end and the chamber was flooded with the red glow of sunset, she was suddenly agitated and sat up, then stretching out her arms, she cried out in a strong voice but quite unlike her own:

'It's time for me, it's time.'

And she fell back.

It was terrible in the room then as the wailing erupted. They all knelt about the bed, Jasio began to read the prayers for the dying and Kłębowa lit the blessed candle. The dying woman repeated the prayers after Jasio, but more weakly all the time, more quietly, faltering. Her eyes faded like a summer's day wearied by toil, her face sank into a cloud of eternal dusk. She let go of the candle and breathed her last.

And so that beggar woman died like the first lady of the village. Ambrozy, who managed to get there just at the end, closed her eyes, and Jasio himself said an ardent prayer over her. The whole village came to pray at her body, to cry, and to wonder with envy at her happy death and easy ending.

Only Jasio, when he looked into her lifeless eyes and into that face, stiffened as rock, ravaged by the claws of death, was shaken by such terror that he fled home, threw himself on to the bed, pressed his face into the pillow and wept.

Jagusia ran straight after him. Although she herself was full of grief and horror, she began to calm him and wipe his tear-stained face. He nestled against her as though against his own mother, laying his aching head on her breast, embracing her around the neck, and almost beside himself with sobbing, he wailed desolately:

'My God, how horrible it is, how terrible!'

The organist's wife came in at that moment. She looked and shook with grim anger.

'What's going on here!' she hissed, stepping into the middle of the room, barely able to restrain herself. 'Well, would you look at her, what a tender nurse. It's a shame that Jasio doesn't need a nanny – he can wipe his own nose!'

Raising her tear-stained eyes and trembling with fright, Jagusia began telling her about the old woman's death. Jasio too rushed forward, eager to explain to his mother what had happened to him, but the organist's wife, clearly egged on earlier by her friends, turned on him:

'You're stupid as a calf! You'd best say nothing, before you get a good hiding as well!'

Leaping to the door and flinging it wide open, she shrieked at Jagusia:

'You, be off! And don't you set foot here again or I'll set the dogs on you!'

'What've I done, what?' Jagna stammered, almost beside herself with shame and distress.

'Get out this minute, or I'm calling for the dogs! I'll not be crying on your account like Hanka or the Voyt's wife! I'll teach you to go romancing, you monkey. You'll remember me, you hussy!' she yelled at the top of her voice.

Bursting into tears, Jagusia tore out of the house and raced off.

And Jasio stood there, thunderstruck.

CHAPTER 12

He leapt up at once to fly after her.

'Where to?' snarled his mother menacingly, blocking the doorway.

'Why did you drive her away, Mama, what for? Because she was so kind to me! That's not fair, I won't allow it! What did she do wrong? What?' he shouted frantically, struggling to break free of his mother's strong arms.

'Quiet, sit down, or I'll call your father ... Why? I'll tell you why: you're to be a priest, so I'll not have you installing a mistress under my roof. I'll not live to see such shame and disgrace, with people pointing their fingers at us! That's why I drove her away, do you understand?'

'Name of the Father and Son! What are you saying, Mama!' he stammered with deepest outrage.

'I say what I know! Aye, I knew you were meeting her here and there, but as God is my witness, I didn't suspect you of anything wicked! I always thought to myself that since my son wears the priestly robe, he'll never dare besmirch it! Else I'd curse you unto the ages and tear you from my heart even though it should break ...' Her eyes blazed in such holy and implacable horror that Jasio froze with terror. 'It was Kozłowa opened my eyes, and now I've seen for myself where that bitch wanted to lead you ...'

He burst into pitiful tears and amid sobbing and protesting against these terrible accusations, he told her with such candour of all their meetings that she believed him completely. Gathering him to her breast, she began wiping his tears and soothing him.

'Don't be surprised that I feared for you. Why, she's the worst scoundrel in the village ...'

'Jagusia! Worst in the village!' He could not believe his ears.

'I'm ashamed, but for your own good I must tell you everything.' And she told him all manner of tales, not sparing him either gossip or the wildest invention.

Jasio's hair stood on end, until he leapt up and shouted:

'It's not true, I'll never believe that Jagusia could be so vile, never ...'

'It's your mother telling you, do you understand? I didn't pluck it out o' thin air.'

'Tales and nothing more! Why, that would be terrible!' He wrung his hands despairingly.

'Why so fierce defending her, eh?'

'I defend everyone innocent, everyone.'

'You're stupid as a sheep.' She was angry now and sorely vexed by his disbelief.

'As you please, Mama. But if Jagusia is so bad, why did you let her come here, to our house?' He was ruffled as a young cockerel.

'I don't have to explain to you. You'll not understand anything since you're so stupid, but I tell you this: keep away from her, because if I spot you together I'll give her such a hiding, in front of the whole village if need be, that she'll remember it for a month of Sundays! And you might catch it yourself, at the same time.' And she left, slamming the door angrily behind her.

Not understanding why calumny of Jagusia should bother him so, Jasio brooded over his mother's words like barbed thistles and choked on them, sating his soul on their wormwood bitterness.

'So that's what you're like, Jaguś! That's what you're like!' he reproached her miserably. Had she appeared right then, he would have turned on her with anger and contempt. Could he have foreseen the like? Never had such terrible things even occurred to him. Contemplating them with growing anguish, however, he leapt up a hundred times to run to her, to look her in the eye and throw a whole litany of sins into her face ... Let her hear what they were saying about her, let her deny it, if she could ... Let her say out loud: 'Not true!' So he pondered feverishly, but believing more and more deeply in her innocence, he was overcome with pity. A quiet longing grew in him, and sweet, joyful memories of meetings woke in him. A sunny cloud of unfathomable delight dimmed his eyes and tormented his heart, so that he started suddenly and began to shout as though to the whole world:

'It's not true! It's not true! It's not true!'

At supper he just stared stubbornly at his plate, avoiding his mother's eyes. Despite the talk of Agata's death, he did not join in the conversation, but mithered ceaselessly, picking at his food, quarrelling with his sisters and complaining of the heat inside the cottage. As soon as they'd tidied away the plates, he went off to the presbytery. The priest was sitting on the porch, a pipe between his teeth, discussing something intently with Ambrozy. He skirted around them from a distance and, wandering some way under the trees, ruminated worriedly.

'But maybe it is true! Mama wouldn't have made it up herself.'

Streams of light poured from the presbytery windows on to the flowerbeds where the dogs were frolicking and growling at each other playfully. From the porch a deep voice could be heard:

'And have you checked the barley at Swine's Hollow?'

'The stalks are a bit green yet, but the grain's dry as pepper already.'

'You must air the vestments tomorrow, or they'll end up mouldy. Take the albs and surplices to Dominikowa – Jagusia can wash them. Who was that came this afternoon with a cow?'

'Some fellow from Modlica. The miller met him on the bridge and tried to persuade him to use his own bull, even said he could use it for free, but the man preferred ours ...'

'He's right. For a rouble he'll have cows to raise and profit his whole life. Do you know if the Kłąbs are arranging Agata's burial?'

'Why, she left a whole ten zlotys for it.'

'She'll be buried with pomp, like a farmer's wife. And tell the confraternity that I'll sell them some wax – let them just buy some of the bleached kind themselves.¹ Tomorrow Michał can do the church chores and you go chivvy the people at harvest. The barometer's hovering, there might be a storm! When is the company getting ready for Czeszochowa?'

'They've ordered a votive Mass for Thursday, so they'll be off right after, aye ...'

Somewhat irritated by this conversation, Jasio went further, to a low wicker fence dividing the orchard from the pasture, and walked along a narrow overgrown path, his head brushing from time to time against the hanging branches, heavy with apples.

It was a hot and stifling evening, smelling of honey and scythed rye from somewhere beyond the gardens. The air was heavy and scorching. Bleached trunks loomed in the murk like shirts hung out to dry, dogs barked crossly by the pond, while now and again the wail of mournful keening could be heard from the Kłąbs'.

Weary at last from all his deliberations, Jasio turned back for home, when all at once he heard some muffled ardent whispers from somewhere near the beehives.

He couldn't see anyone, but stopped and listened with bated breath.

'... Let me go, the blight take you ... let go, or I'll scream!'

'... Idiot ... What are you struggling for? Would I hurt you, would I?'

'... Someone'll hear. Lordy, you'll crush my ribs ... let go ...'

The Borynas' Pietrek and the priest's Maryna! Recognizing their voices, he went away with a smile, but after a few paces, he turned back to his former spot and listened with a strangely thumping heart. Thick bushes and darkness shielded them. It was impossible to make them out, but more and more clearly he could hear short, broken, agitated words, spurting like flames, and then long pauses full of feverish, gasping breaths and scuffles.

'... Just like Jagusia's got, you'll see ... only don't stop me, Maryś, just ...'

'... Like I'd trust you ... am I such a ... Lordy, let me catch my breath ...'

The bushes rustled violently, something fell heavily to the ground, but a moment later they shook, and again came short feverish whispers, muffled laughter and kissing.

'... I can't even sleep and my mind's always on you, Maryś ... on you, my dearest ...'

'... That's what you say to all of 'em ... I waited till midnight for you, you were with someone else ...'

Jasio seemed suddenly dazed and he shuddered like an aspen. A gust of wind blew through the orchard. The trees swayed, muttering quietly as though in their sleep. Such honeyed scents wafted from the beehives that his chest tightened and his eyes watered. A hot tremor ran through him and something so pleasurable began assailing him that he could only stretch and sigh again and again.

'... She's no more to me than them stars ... She's got her eye on Jasio now ...'

Coming to his senses, he pressed against the fence and listened, increasingly agog.

'... It's true ... she goes out every night to meet him ... Kozłowa caught 'em in the woods ...'

The world spun and his eyes grew dark. He could barely stand. There in the thickets the smack of provocative kisses, laughter and whispers continued ...

'... I'll scald your head with boiling water like a dog ...'

'... Just this once, dearest ... why, I'll not hurt you ... you'll see ...'

'... Pietruś, Lordy, Pietruś ...'

Jasio jumped away and ran like the wind, tearing his cassock on the bushes. He fell into the house red as a beetroot, feverish and streaming with sweat, but luckily no one paid him any attention. His mother sat by the fireplace with her distaff and yarn quietly singing 'All Our Daily Cares', his sisters joining in with shrill voices, together with Michał, who was polishing the church

candlesticks. Father was sleeping already.

Jasio holed up in his room and got down to his breviary, but what of it when he could still hear those whispers and kisses whenever he doggedly repeated the Latin words? In the end he leaned his head on his book and gave himself up impulsively to whatever thoughts rushed through him like burning gales.

'So that's how it is?' he pondered with ever greater dismay and an agreeable shiver at once.

'So that's how it is!' he repeated aloud suddenly, and wishing to break free of these loathsome thoughts, he took his breviary under his arm and went to his mother.

'I'll go say a prayer by Agata,' he said quietly and meekly.

'Go, my boy. I'll come for you later.' She looked at him fondly.

There was hardly anyone at the Kłabs' house now, only Ambrozy muttering something from a book beside the dead woman, who lay covered with a sheet. A blessed candle stuck in a jug smouldered at the head of the bed. Branches laden with apples peered in through the open windows. The night was glittering with stars; now and then some belated passer-by poked in a bewildered face, and in the hallway the dogs kept growling.

Jasio knelt down under the light and gave himself so fervently to prayer that he did not notice when Ambrozy hobbled off home. The Kłabs went to bed somewhere in the orchard and the first cockcrow rang out. It was lucky his mother did not forget to come for him.

But what of it, when sleep barely touched him, for as soon as it began to best him, Jagusia would appear before him as though in the flesh. He'd start from his bed, rubbing his eyes and looking about in alarm, but there was no one there – the whole house lay sunk in deepest sleep, and from the next room his father's snoring resounded.

'So maybe that was why she ...' he thought, remembering her hot kisses, bright eyes and trembling voice. 'And I thought ...!' He shook with shame, jumped out of bed, opened the window and sat there, meditating until dawn, confessing his inadvertent temptations and crimes.

At Mass in the morning, he did not dare raise his eyes to the people nor look about the church, but prayed all the more fervently for Jagusia, for now he believed completely in her terrible sins, yet still could not manage to make himself angry or disgusted with her.

'What's the matter with you? You were sighing so hard it's a wonder the candles didn't go out!' the priest asked in the sacristy.

'My cassock's so hot!' he complained, turning his face away quickly.

'When you get used to it, you'll wear it like a second skin.'

Jasio kissed his hand and went for breakfast, walking in the shade by the pond, since it was baking almost unbearably in the hot sun. He bumped into the priest's Maryna, who was pulling the blind horse along by its mane and singing noisily.

The reminder jabbed at him like a bodkin and he challenged her crossly.

'And what's Marysia so pleased about?' He gazed at her with shamefaced curiosity.

'I'm just feeling merry!' She laughed, flashing her white teeth. She tugged at the horse and sang out louder than ever.

'So merry after yesterday!' He turned away quickly since her white calves were glistening from under her skirts hitched high. Spreading his hands helplessly, he stepped into the Kłabs'. Agata now lay all in pomp in the middle of the room, dressed in her best clothes, in the cap with the richly pleated white frills over the forehead, the beads around her neck, a new woollen skirt and boots done up with red laces. Her face seemed moulded from bleached wax and strangely elated. A holy picture rested crookedly between her stiff fingers and two candles burned by her head. Jagustynka was chasing the flies away with a great branch and juniper smoke wafted from the fireplace and spread all about the chamber. Every now and then, someone came in to say a prayer for the dead woman and several children were milling by the cottage walls.

Jasio looked timidly around the gloomy house.

'The Kłabs have gone to town,' whispered Jagustynka. 'She left them quite a bit, so they must put on something of a show for the burial – she were kin after all! The reception of the body won't be till evening, for Mateusz has yet to finish the coffin ...'

As the room was very stuffy and the dead woman's yellow face, frozen in a smile, filled him with dread, he just crossed himself and went out, running into Jagusia on the threshold. She was with her mother and noticing him she stopped, but he went past without a word. He did not even praise God in greeting, but glanced back involuntarily from the fence. She was still standing on the spot, gazing at him with sad eyes.

At home he did not want to eat breakfast, complaining of a bad headache.

'Go for a little walk, maybe it will stop,' his mother advised.

'And go where? So that Mama can immediately think God knows what!'

'Jasio, what are you saying!'

'Why, Mama, you don't let me take a step beyond the house! Why, you've forbidden me even to talk to people! Why ...' He took his revenge, greatly irked. And it ended with her binding his head in a cloth sprinkled with vinegar and putting him to bed in a darkened room. Chasing the children outside, she watched over him like a brood hen until he'd had a good sleep and a solid meal.

'And now go for a walk along the poplar road. There's more shade there and it's cooler.'

He did not reply, but sensing that his mother was watching him carefully, he went deliberately in a completely different direction. Trailing about the village, he watched the blacksmiths pounding with their hammers. He looked in at the mill, wandered round the gardens and gazed eagerly at the flax fields and wherever a glimmer of women's red skirts could be seen. He sat with Pan Jacek, minding Weronka's cows on a baulk, drank milk with Szymek at Podlesie and did not return to the village until dusk, without meeting Jagusia anywhere.

He did not see her until the following day, at Agata's burial. The way she looked at him throughout the whole service made the letters on the page skip in front of his eyes so that he made mistakes in his singing. When they were taking Agata to the graveyard, she walked almost right beside him, ignoring the baleful looks of the organist's wife. Overhearing her pitiful sighs, he melted inside like snow in spring sunshine.

And when they were lowering the coffin into the pit and lamentation burst forth, he heard her mournful weeping and understood that she was sobbing not for the dead woman, but from the heavy torment of an aching, injured heart.

'I must have a talk with her,' he determined, having returned from the burial. But he couldn't escape quickly, since that afternoon folk were already beginning to arrive in Lipce from distant villages, and even from other parishes, for the following day's pilgrimage to Częstochowa.

The company was to leave early, right after a solemn votive Mass. They slowly gathered, filling the road by the pond with noise and carts, and many came to the presbytery too. Jasio had to sit and deal with all kinds of matters on behalf of the parish priest, but spying a convenient moment as evening approached, he took his book and went out unnoticed on to the baulk behind the barns, under the pear tree where he and Jagusia had often sat.

But, aye, he barely glanced at the book and tossed it somewhere into the grass. Scanning the fields, he jumped into the rye and stealthily, almost on all fours, picked his way towards Dominikowa's gardens.

Jagusia was just thinning the potatoes, quite unaware that someone was watching her, for again and again she would straighten with an effort and, leaning on her hoe, look about with sad eyes and sigh heavily.

'Jagusia!' he called timidly.

She went white as a sheet and stood as though turned to stone, scarcely able to believe her eyes. Her breath catching and tightening in her breast, she looked at him as though at some miraculous vision. The glimmer of a sweet smile that had appeared on her suddenly reddened lips lit up and exploded like the sun.

Jasio's eyes brightened too and his heart was flooded with sweetness, but he kept himself in check, saying nothing, and just sat down on a ridge and looked at her with strange pleasure.

'I feared I'd never be seeing Pan Jasio again ...'

It was as though a fragrant breeze blowing from the meadow had hit him. He lowered his head as that voice rang out in his soul, filling him with almost incomprehensible happiness.

'And yesterday at the Kłabs', Pan Jasio didn't even glance my way ...'

She stood before him flushed like a rose, like apple blossom, swooning in a swelter of longing suffused with such loveliness it was a miracle to behold.

'It were a wonder my heart didn't break! It were a wonder I didn't lose my mind.' The tears glittered on her lashes, bestrewing the blue sky of her eyes with diamonds.

'Jagusia!' burst out somehow from beneath his very heart.

Kneeling down in the furrow and pressing against his knees, she fixed her eyes on him, twin fiery abysses, blue as the sky and like the sky unfathomable, eyes intoxicating as kisses, as the embrace of beloved arms, eyes filled alike with temptation and the innocence of a child.

He shuddered violently and as though defending himself against a spell began sternly to list all her sins – all that his mother had told him. She drank in every word without lowering her eyes, but she could make out little of it; she knew only one thing, that the one chosen above all others was sitting before her, that something was being said, that his eyes were shining, and that she was kneeling as though before a saint and praying with the unfathomable faith of love.

'Tell me it's not true, Jaguś, any of it? Tell me!' he pleaded insistently.

'It's not true! It's not true!' she declared with such sincerity that he believed her instantly, he had to believe her. Leaning her breast against his knees and drowning in his eyes, she quietly confessed her love ... She opened her soul wide before him as at holy confession, threw it to his feet like an errant little bird and with a prayerful, fervent plea surrendered herself entirely to his mercy, for better or worse.

Jasio was trembling like a leaf shaken by a violent storm. He wanted to push her off and run away, but he just whispered in a dazed voice:

'Hush, Jaguś, you mustn't, it's a sin, hush!'

Until she fell silent, completely drained. They were both silent now, avoiding each other's eyes and, at the same time, pressed so close together that they could hear the beating of each other's hearts and quiet, torrid breathing. They both felt so happy and joyful. Tears streamed down both their pale faces, their red lips were smiling and their souls plunged as during the Elevation into the holiest of silences and mystery shining somewhere on high and soaring ever higher above the world.

The sun had gone down and the earth was glowing in the gilded dew of twilight. Everything had grown quiet, everything held its breath and everything seemed utterly still, listening to the bells as they rang for the Angelus, and everything seemed deep in a silent prayer of thanksgiving for the holy blessing of the day gone by. They went out into the fields, sprinkled with the dust of sunset. They walked along baulks full of flowers, through ripened wheat, dangling their hands among the ears of grain that bowed to their knees. They walked as though haloed, gazing into the glow of dusk, into the great golden abyss of the heavens, with heaven in their souls and in their eyes.

It was as though a Mass were taking place within them, so full of adoration were they, their souls kneeling in rapture, soaring hearts singing of divine mercy, revealed at that moment to them alone. They did not say another word to each other, not a single word, though sometimes their glances would cross like flashes of lightning, completely drained of their own ardour now and oblivious to their own selves. Nor were they aware of the hymn they were singing, arisen in them of its own accord. Like a bird brimming with song, it flew over the gloomy fields, off into the wide world. Nor did they even know where they were, whither they were going or why.

Suddenly, from somewhere close by, a harsh hoarse voice broke in on them:

'Jasio! Get home!'

He was sober in an instant. They were on the poplar road and his mother was standing before them with a grim and implacable face. He began to babble and mutter nonsense.

'Come home!'

She took him by the hand and began pulling him angrily after her. He submitted meekly, offering no resistance ...

Jagusia followed as though spellbound, when suddenly the organist's wife picked up a stone from the road and hurled it at her with a vengeance.

'Get away! Back to your kennel, you bitch!' she shouted with contempt.

Jagusia looked around, not understanding at all who she meant, but when they had vanished from sight, she wandered a long time along the lanes and then, back at the house when everyone had gone to bed, she sat by the wall of the cottage until daybreak.

Hour followed hour. The cockerels crowed, horses neighed at the carts by the pond, dawn was rising. The village began to get up. They took water from the pond and drove the cattle out to pasture. Some were already setting off for work, women were already chattering, children fussing and whining. And still she sat in the same spot, dreaming of Jasio with her eyes wide open – dreaming that she was saying something to him, that they were looking at each other and so close together that sweet flames ran through her, that they were going somewhere, singing something or other, she couldn't remember – and so it spun in a circle, on and on.

Her mother woke her from these marvellous visions, or rather Hanka, who arrived ready for her journey and, though timidly, was first to stretch out her hand to make peace.

'I am going to Częstochowa, so forgive my sins against you ...'

'God bless you for your kind words, but an injury's an injury!' the old woman muttered.

'Let's not go into that! I ask you from a sincere heart to forgive me.'

'I'm not harbouring anger in my heart for you now,' said Dominikowa with a deep sigh.

'Nor I! Though I've suffered plenty!' Jagusia responded gravely and, hearing the Angelus bell, went to get changed for church.

'You know, the organist's Jasio is coming with the company,' Hanka spoke up after a moment.

On hearing this, Jagusia tumbled out of the cottage half dressed.

'Why, the organist's wife herself told me that he were dead set on going to Częstochowa!' said Hanka. 'It'll be more cheerful for us to journey with our little priest and more dignified! Go with God.'

She said a friendly farewell and went off to church, telling folk the news along the way, and indeed they were amazed, all except for Jagustynka, who shook her head and said quietly:

'There's something up here! He's not going out o' goodwill, oh no ...'

But there was no time to probe further, for half the village had gathered in the church and the priest was coming out to begin the votive Mass for the pilgrims' intention.

Jasio served Mass as usual, though today his face seemed a little paler and strangely pained. His eyes looked bruised and still glazed with tears, so that the whole church loomed as though through a mist: Tereska, lying crosswise throughout the whole service; Jagusia's frightened eyes; his mother sitting in the gentry pew; and the pilgrims coming up for communion. He saw everything as through a fog, through those barely held-back tears, through the grief stabbing at his heart and through a deadly sorrow.

The parish priest said his farewells from the altar to those departing and when they'd piled out of the church, he sprinkled them with holy water and blessed them. They raised the banner at once. The cross shone at the front, someone began the singing and the company set off on their long journey.

Of the villagers from Lipce were Hanka, Marysia Balcerkówna, Kłębowa and her daughter, wry-faced Grzela, Tereska and her husband – who had vowed not to touch hot food for the whole journey – and a couple of hired hands, but together with the folk from other villages there must have been a hundred people.

The whole village saw them off. The carts heaped with bundles followed behind. Despite the early hour the heat was building, the sun was blinding and the dust billowing, so that they seemed to be walking through choking grey clouds.

Jagusia accompanied her mother and the others. She looked terribly drawn and trembled inside with desolation. Swallowing miserable bitter tears, she gazed at Jasio as at the sun, though from a distance, for the organist's wife and children did not leave him for a moment, so there was no chance of saying anything to him or even of seeing him properly.

Mateusz was saying something to her, then her mother, then others; what of it when she knew but one thing, that Jasio was going and that she would never ever see him again?

By the shrine at Podlesie they said goodbye to the company, which soon drew further and further away amid singing, until it disappeared from sight and only dust clouds could be seen rising over the road somewhere in the sunny distance.

'Why? Why?' she moaned, trailing back to the village after the others like a corpse.

'I'll drop down dead!' she thought, as though she really could sense the onset of death within her. She went more and more slowly and heavily, worn out by the swelter, exhaustion and terrible anguish.

'What'll I do now, what?' she asked, gazing into that strangely empty, painfully glaring day.

She longed for the night and its silence, but night brought her no relief, nor consolation. She knocked about until dawn around the cottage, going out on to the road, even rushing as far as Podlesie to the shrine, where she had seen Jasio for the last time. With eyes reddened from torment, she looked along the wide sandy road as though for traces of his steps, at least a shadow of him, at least a clod of earth that he had touched.

Nothing. For her there was nothing and no one; neither mercy nor escape was there for her. In the end even tears failed her; deadened by sadness and grief, her eyes shone like wells of fathomless pain.

And only now and then, when she prayed, would a forlorn reproach burst from her parched lips:

'And what's it all for, my God, what for?'

CHAPTER 13

At Dominikowa's, things had become almost unbearable. Jagusia wandered about in a stupor, oblivious to the whole of God's world. Jędrzych despatched his chores any old how and was more and more often at Szymek's, and there was such decline and neglect on the farm that cows would often be driven un milked to pasture, pigs squealed with hunger and the horses chewed the hayracks, neighing at their empty mangers. The old woman could not manage everything. She was still hobbling with a stick, half blind, with bound eyes, so it was no wonder her head was bursting with vexations.

For how could it not? Here was manure for the wheatfields, drying on the strips with no one to plough it in. The flax was begging to be picked, and the potatoes needed weeding and earthing up again. Wood for fuel was short, the farm tools were rusting and harvest was round the corner. There was work enough for ten pairs of hands, yet you'd think there was time for folk to stand and stare and pick their noses. She even took on a hired hand, a woman, and rushed about herself as best she could and nagged her children to work, but Jagusia was deaf to all her pleas and admonishments, while Jędrzych in response to some threat would retort boldly:

'I'll chuck it all in and leave if you're not careful! You threw out Szymek, so do it yourself! He's not pining for you – he's got a house, got money, got a woman, got a cow. He's a proper farmer!' He deliberately goaded her, though keeping his distance.

'Aye, that thug has managed everything shrewdly!' She sighed deeply.

'That well, even Nastusia's amazed!'

'We'll need to hire someone or even take a farmhand,' she thought aloud.

Jędrzych scratched and said uncertainly:

'Ha, why look for a stranger, when Szymek's ready ... You have only to say the word ...'

'Fool! Don't invite yourself where you're not asked!' she snapped and was sorely disgruntled by the fact that, one way or another, she'd have to give in and make some kind of peace with him.

But most of all she worried about Jagusia. In vain did she attempt to discover what ailed her. Jędrzych didn't know either and she did not dare ask her friends in case they should supply more than she'd bargained for. For three whole days after the company had left for Czystochowa, she blundered in all manner of guesses as in a bothersome mist, until finally on Saturday afternoon, at the end of her tether, she took a sturdy drake under her arm and went off to the presbytery.

Dominikowa came back that evening stormy as an autumn night, tear-stained and breathing heavily. She did not speak to anyone, and not until after supper when she was left alone with Jagusia did she close the door to the hallway and declare:

'Do you know what they're saying about you and Jasio!'

'I'm not interested in gossip!' she replied reluctantly, lifting feverish eyes.

'Interested or not, you should know you cannot hide anything from folk! And he who does things on the quiet, of him they speak loud! And God defend us from what they're saying about you!'

She enlarged on all she'd learned from the parish priest and at the organist's.

'They passed judgement on him that very night. The organist gave him a good hiding, the priest swinging his pipe for good measure, and to protect him from you they packed him off to Czystochowa. Do you hear? Mark what trouble you've stirred!' she shouted fiercely.

'Jesus, Mary! They beat him! They beat Jasio!' She leapt up ready to run to his defence, hissing through gritted teeth: 'I hope their arms drop off, I hope the plague gets 'em!' She burst out crying. Streams of bitter tears poured from her reddened eyes and all the wounds of her soul flowed as though with her own living blood.

But Dominikowa, taking no notice, began to flail her, as though with stick in hand, with the reminders of all her sins and trespasses. Not one did she omit, listing every single thing that had irked and sorely pained her since time immemorial.

'This has to stop, do you understand! You cannot live like this any more!' she shouted more and more vehemently, though burning tears were streaming from under the rag binding her eyes.

'That they should hold you as the lowest of the low! That they should point their fingers at you! Such disgrace for my old age, such shame, my Jesus,' she moaned piteously.

'You were no better when you were young by all accounts!' Jagna snapped.

The old woman was so consumed by anger that she could barely splutter:

'They'd not forgive even a saint.'

She did not dare abuse her further. Jagusia set about ironing some frills for the next day. It was set to be a windy evening. The trees rustled, the moon sailed across the sky, cluttered with little clouds. Somewhere in the village, girls were singing and a fiddle scraped a lively tune.

Beyond the window, the voice of the Voyt's wife was heard in passing:

'I've had neither sight nor sound of him since he left for the chancellery yesterday ...'

'He went off with the notary to the *powiat* last night. The Soltys says the prefect summoned 'em both to his,' Mateusz was saying.

When they'd gone, the old woman piped up again, but more mildly:

'Why did you chase Mateusz out of the house?'

'I was sick of him. Why should he be sitting about here! I'm not looking for a man!'

'It's high time to be looking! People'd soon stop their harassing! Even Mateusz, he's not to be scorned. He's a canny fellow, and honest ...'

She dwelt upon him for some time and was greatly encouraging, but there was not a peep from Jagusia, occupied as she was with her own tasks and troubles, so the old woman desisted and instead took up her rosary. Outside, the voices had faded. The only noise came from the little trees tussling with the wind and the clattering of the mill. It was late at night and the moon seemed lost in banks of cloud, shining at their fringes here and there, where beams of light broke free.

'Jaguś, you must get to confession tomorrow. You'll feel better to be rid of your sins.'

'What the heck, I'm not going!'

'You don't want to go to confession!' Her mother's voice was hoarse with horror.

'I don't. Priest is quick to punish but none too keen to help ...'

'Hush, may the Lord Jesus not punish you for such sinful talk! Well, I'm telling you, go to confession, go. Do penance and pray to God and everything may still turn out well for you.'

'Don't I have penance enough already, eh? Where's my sin? What for? This is the reward I get for all my loving and all my suffering, is it? Worst in the world has already happened to me!' she complained miserably. The poor wretch hadn't a clue that something even worse and more unexpected and more unjust would befall her.

The next day, Sunday, before High Mass, the almost unbelievable news burst upon the village that they'd arrested the Voyt for money missing from the community coffers. It was impossible to credit at first, and although someone came running almost hourly with a new and even worse report, they still did not take it much to heart.

'Idlers, thinking up whatever for fun and then spreading it about!' said the more sober among them.

But they soon believed it when the blacksmith returned from town and confirmed every last word, and when Jankiel said to everyone assembled in the inn at noon:

'It's all true! There is five thousand missing from the coffers. They're taking his whole farm for it, and if that's not enough, Lipce must make up the rest!'

They were all enraged. With dire misery at every turn, nothing to throw in the pot, many in debt to the hilt just to scrape by until harvest, God forbid that they should now fund a thief! It was more than anyone could bear, and no wonder the whole village was livid with anger and that curses, threats and insults were flying like stones:

'Why, you scum – may you die like a dog!'

'I never kept company with him and I shan't pay for him neither.'

'Nor me! Partied, caroused, and the rest can suffer for it!'

They said one after another, so distressed that several were ready to cry with despondency.

'I've had my eye on him for ages, I've said where it was headed. I've told you, but you'd not listen and here you are!' old Płoszka taunted pointedly. He was assisted by Płoszkowa, telling anyone who'd listen:

'You know, Antek has already worked out that to help out Mr Voyt we'll be paying three roubles a morgen, but for such a good friend who'd mind paying ten ...'

So downcast were people at the news that hardly anyone went to church but only conferred and complained together. The farmyards were full of people; folk stood in front of the cottages, and particularly around the pond, puzzling in vain over what he'd done with so much money.

'Someone must've fleeced him. There's no way he could have spent that much alone.'

'He trusted the notary, and it's well known what a rogue he is!'

'It's a shame for the man. He's done us wrong, but himself most of all!' said the more sober among them. At that, Płoszkowa planted her fat belly between them and if she didn't start rubbing her dry eyes and regretfully lamenting:

'Well, I'm sorry for her, the Voyt's wife! Poor woman, a lady she were, nose in the air, and now what! They'll take the house, sell the land and the wretch'll be left a hired hand, to earn her living. If she'd only had some fun of it!'

'She ate plenty a tasty morsel in her time!' yelled Kozłowa, taking up the thread, if in rather a different direction. 'The scum took their pleasures like they were squires. Meat every day! Voyt's wife had half a cup o' sugar in her coffee and they drank pure arak! From glasses! I saw how he brought cartloads of all kinds o' dainties from town. It weren't fasting made their bellies swell!'

They listened attentively, though she was gabbling nonsense in the end, but it was the organist's wife who finally hit the spot. She happened to be in the village, seemingly by chance, and having listened to the talk, remarked casually:

'Why, do you not know what the Voyt spent so much on?'

They began to crowd around her, quizzing her and forcing her to answer.

'Wasted it on Jagusia, of course.'

They hadn't expected that, and just stared at each other in amazement.

'The whole parish has been talking of it since spring! I'm saying nothing, but ask anyone, from Modlica even, and you'll soon learn the whole truth!'

And off she went as though unwilling to reveal any more, but the women wouldn't let it go. They pressed her to the fence, and so pestered her that she began to recount, ostensibly in confidence, how the Voyt had bought Jagusia rings of pure gold, what silk shawls, what fine linens, and such beads, and what ready cash he'd given her! Aye, she told fibs fit to raise the dust, yet they believed them as though they were holy truth. Jagustynka alone spoke up angrily:

'Fiddle-faddle, pray for us. You saw this, did you, missus?'

'I did and I'll swear to it in church that it's her he stole for! Her! And maybe she even persuaded him! Ho, ho! She's game for anything, nothing's holy to her – she's without shame or conscience! She runs about the village like a bitch on heat and spreads nothing but scandal and misery. She even wanted to lure my Jasio, a boy innocent as a child. He ran away from her and told me everything! The horror, to not even let a priest alone!' she babbled fast, panting with rage.

Like a spark to gunpowder, all past resentments against Jagusia erupted, all the envy and anger and hatred. Every one of them listed all they'd ever been harbouring, so that an unspeakable clamour arose. They shouted over one another, each more shrill than the last.

'To think our holy soil bears one like her!'

'And who caused Maciej to die? Just think back!'

'The whole village'll be doing penance for that poxy piece!'

'She even wanted to lead a priest astray! Jesus, have mercy on us!'

'Has there not been boozing and brawling and offence to God enough on her account!'

'She brings disgrace on the whole village! They're all pointing the finger at Lipce thanks to her!'

'Plague-ridden air's better than a pest like that.'

'There'll always be sin and lechery and evil while there's her kind in the village. The Voyt stole for her today and tomorrow another'll do the same!'

'Take a stick to her and throw the scum to the dogs!'

'Drive her out the village, banish her to the woods and forest, like a leper!'

'Throw her out! It's the only way! Throw her out!'

They were screaming, livid with anger, ready for anything and, urged on by the organist's wife, they headed to the Voyt's.

She came out, puffy with crying, and so haggard, so unhappy and miserable, that they began to hug her, crying over her and commiserating with all their hearts. It was only after a little while that the organist's wife mentioned Jagusia to her.

'God's truth! It's her fault, all of it!' she lamented despairingly. 'That slut, that hellcat! May you die in a ditch for the wrongs you have done me, may you rot for my shame, my unhappiness!'

Slumping on to a bench, she succumbed to unbounded sobbing and despair.

Having wept and sorrowed over the Voyt's wife to their heart's content, they went off to their homes, for the sun was already dipping toward the west. Only the organist's wife was left. Shutting themselves away together, the two women clearly came up with a plan, since by dusk they were rushing about the village and cottages on some quiet, secret business.

The Płoszkas joined them and they enlisted a few people more. Together they went to the parish priest. He listened to it all, but just spread his hands and cried:

'I'll have no part in anything. Do as you please, I wash my hands of it, and first thing tomorrow I'm off to Zarnowo for the whole day!'

The evening was rife with quarrels, parleys, bickering and secret whispering. When darkness fell, all those conspiring gathered at the inn, where the organist and his wife treated them all, and again they began to discuss and deliberate. All the foremost farmers came together and almost all the married women. They'd been conferring for some time, when Płoszkowa shouted:

'And where's Antek Boryna? The whole village has gathered. He's first among farmers in Lipce – we cannot hold a meeting without 'im, it'll not be valid.'

'True, send for him! He must come! Can't be done without 'im!' they yelled.

'But maybe he'll defend her, who knows?' someone whispered.

'Would he dare oppose the whole village! It must be all!'

The Soltys sprang off to fetch him, from his bed indeed, since he was already sleeping.

'You have to come and say your piece too! And if you don't, they'll say you're shielding her and are opposing the community! The women'll not forget past sins. Come. There must be an end to it at last.'

And he went, though with a heavy heart, for go he must.

The inn was bursting at the seams and there was a quiet hum of voices since just at that moment the organist was standing on a bench and practically giving a sermon.

'... and there is no other way! A village is like a house: let one robber take out a sill-beam from beneath it, let another take a fancy to the joists and a third want a piece of wall – in the end the house will come crashing down and all inside be crushed to death! Mark my words! If everyone is free to steal and wreck, to damage and give way to lust, then what will happen to the village? I tell you, it'll not be a village but a damned sty and a disgrace and shame to all honest folk! They'll avoid it from afar and cross themselves at its mention! I say to you that, sooner or later, divine retribution must fall on such a village, as it fell on Sodom and Gomorrah of old! It will fall and lay waste to everyone, for everyone's equally guilty, those who do wrong and those who allow evil to spread! Holy Scripture tells us: if your hand offend you cut it off, and if your eye has sinned you pluck it out and chuck it to the dogs! Jagusia, I tell you, is worse than plague and pestilence, for she sows scandal, sins against all the commandments and drags God's wrath and his terrible vengeance down upon this village! Cast her out, while there's time! The measure of her sins is overflowing and the time for punishment has come.' He roared like a bull until his eyes were popping out of his red face.

'Aye! Time's up! The people are sanctioned to punish and sanctioned to reward! Cast her from the village! Drive her out!' Their yells grew louder.

Grzela, the Voyt's brother, held forth too, old Płoszka spoke, and Gulbas declaimed, but hardly anyone listened, for everyone was talking at once. The organist's wife constantly repeated the story about Jasio. The Voyt's wife too bent everyone's ears with the wrongs done to her, and nor did others hold back, so that the din was loud as at a fair.

Only Antek said nothing. He stood by the bar, sombre as night, jaw clenched, pale with anguish. There were moments when he had an urge to seize a bench and smash it across all those shrieking mugs and stamp them into the ground like nasty vermin. He was so sick of everything that he drank glass after glass and just spat and cursed quietly.

Płoszka came up to him and asked loudly before the whole inn:

'Everyone is agreed: Jagusia must be banished from the village. You say your piece, Antoni.'

The inn suddenly grew silent. All eyes were fixed on him; they were almost certain that he would object, but he just sighed, drew himself up and said loudly:

'I live in the village, and I stand with the village! You want to cast her out, then cast her out; and if you want to stick her on an altar, then stick her on it! It's all the same to me!'

Thrusting aside the arms blocking his way, he went out without looking at anyone.

They conferred a long time still after his departure, almost until dawn, and by morning everyone knew that it had been decided to cast out Jagusia from the village.

Hardly anyone stood in her defence, for they shouted everyone down. Mateusz alone, fearing no one, cursed them all to their faces, fulminated against the whole village and, thoroughly enraged, rushed off to seek solace at Antek's.

'Do you know about Jagusia?' He was white as a corpse and trembling all over.

'I do, they have the right!' ¹Antek said curtly, washing himself by the wall.

'A plague on such a right! This is the work of the organist's clan! How can we allow such injustice! What's she done to anyone? And it's not true what they're accusing her of, nothing but lies! Jesus, that they dare drive a person out like a rabid dog. There's no way it can happen!'

'Will you oppose the whole community?'

'You speak as though you stand with 'em,' he snarled with grim accusation.

'I stand with no one, but she's as much to me as this stone.'

'Help, Antek, think of something. Good God, my head is spinning! Think: what'll she do, where'll she go? Son-of-a-bitch, thugs and wolves they are. I'll snatch up that axe and hack 'em down. I'll not allow it, I'll not allow it!'

'I cannot help you. They've made up their minds, so what good's one objection – nothing.'

'You've a grudge against her!' he yelled unexpectedly.

'Grudge or not, what's it to anyone,' he said grimly and, leaning against the wall, gazed into the distance. A hidden, eternally vivid clump of loves and jealousies knotted painfully within him so that he swayed inside like a moaning tree tossed by a gale.

He looked round all of a sudden. Mateusz was gone. The village seemed an oddly alien, strangely loathsome place, screaming and shrill.

Truly, that memorable day was unusual somehow. The sun was pale, almost swollen. The weather was stifling and terribly hot, and the sky hung low, crammed with huge louring clouds. Gusts of wind kept springing up and sweeping through and dust billowed above the roads. A storm was in the offing, and somewhere over the woods it seemed to gleam.

Meanwhile, a mighty turmoil was beginning to rage among the people. They rushed like madmen about the village, quarrels shook every cottage, women came to blows at the pond and the dogs barked endlessly. Hardly anyone went out to the fields to work. The cattle had not been driven out to pasture and bellowed in the byres. Even the priest said no Masses that day and left at the crack of dawn. Unrest and anxiety grew from minute to minute.

Marking that more and more people were gathering in the organist's farmyard, Antek shouldered his scythe and hurried off to the fields by the forest. The wind hindered him, tangling the rye and throwing sand into his eyes, but he knuckled down and began to mow, calmly listening at the same time to the distant murmur.

'Maybe it's now,' flashed through his mind suddenly. His heart thumped like a hammer. Anger yanked at him and, standing bolt upright, he almost threw down his scythe to fly to the rescue, but he pulled himself together in time.

'Let the one who's guilty bear the punishment. Let it be, let it be.'

The rustling rye bowed to his feet, dashing against him like stormy waters. The wind tousled his hair and dried his face, sweaty with torment. His eyes saw almost nothing, as though he were there in person, at Jagna's side, so that it was only his hard, well-schooled hands that guided the scythe, cutting swathe upon swathe.

The wind bore a long, drawn-out cry from the village.

He threw down the scythe and crouched against the wall of rye as though he were pressing into the earth, as though he were clinging to it with all his might, as though he were surrendering himself to its iron grip, and he endured, did not give in, though his eyes darted to the village like frantic birds, though his heart spluttered with dread, though he shook and juddered with anxiety.

'Everything must take its course, everything. We plough to sow, sow to reap, and what obstructs needs plucking out like a bad weed,' some stern ancient voice spoke within him, as if issuing from the earth and its human settlements.

Still he rebelled, though he began to listen ever more humbly.

'Aye, everyone has the right to defend themselves from wolves, everyone.'

Some final griefs and other thoughts snatched at him, in harsh stinging gusts. They wrapped him in a dark cloud, raising him from the spot.

Leaping to his feet, he sharpened the scythe with a whetstone, then crossed himself, spat on his hands and set to work, dashing swathe after swathe with such vehemence that the narrow blade of the scythe whistled and the walls of rye moaned.

Meanwhile, in the village a terrible time of judgement and punishment had begun, a scene almost beyond words. Lipce seemed in the grip of delirium, people were downright raving, so that the more prudent shut themselves in their cottages or escaped to the fields, while the rest gathered at the pond in groups. Tempers seething as though drunk with anger, they goaded each other with shouts, so that everyone was yelling now, everyone was railing and raging all together, creating a shrill hum, like distant threatening thunder.

At a certain point, the whole village descended on Dominikowa's house like a noisy gathering flood, led by the wives of the organist and Voyt, and behind them jostled the whole furious bellowing herd. They burst into the cottage like a storm, until the walls shook. Dominikowa barred their way, so they trampled her. Jedrzych leapt to defend her and in a flash they had done the same to him. Finally, Mateusz tried to stop them at the storeroom and though he brandished a bar and fought with all his might, in less than a Hail Mary he was lying at the wall with a split head, unconscious.

Jagusia was shut in the storeroom. When they tore down the door, she stood pressed to the wall and did not defend herself. She did not make a sound, but was white as a corpse. Horror and death burned darkly in her wide-staring eyes.

A hundred hands reached for her, a hundred hands with hungry greedy claws grasped her from every side, plucked her like a shallow-rooted bush from the ground and dragged her out into the farmyard.

'Tie her up, she might break free and run off,' advised the Voyt's wife.

A cart stood ready on the road, with two black cows harnessed to it and filled to the brim with pigs' dung. They threw her, trussed like a sheep, on to the dung and set off in the midst of an infernal frenzy, pelting her with mocking insults, laughter and curses a hundred times more murderous than hailstones.

Then the whole procession stopped in front of the church.

'She should be stripped naked and birched in the vestibule!' ² yelled Kozłowa.

'That kind were always beaten at the church! Till the blood runs! Get her!' they screamed.

Luckily, the gate to the graveyard was closed and Ambrozy stood there with the parish priest's shotgun in his hands. As soon as they halted, he yelled at the top of his lungs:

'Anyone dares enter church ground and I'll shoot, so help me God! I'll kill you like a dog,' he threatened. He looked so terrifying, readying his weapon as though to fire, that they desisted and pressed on along the poplar road.

They even began to hurry, since a storm could erupt at any moment. The sky had grown even darker. The wind beat against the poplars, almost flattening them, dust clouds surged from beneath their feet, blinding them, and thunder boomed on all sides.

'Hurry up, Pietrek, faster!' they urged, looking anxiously at the sky. They had quietened a little, walking pell-mell along the sides of the road, for the middle was thick with sand. Only occasionally one of the more tenacious women, catching up with the cart, would vent, shrieking with rancour:

'You swine! You slut! Get off to the soldiers, you pox-ridden sloven!'

'You've had your fun, so feast on your shame, have a taste of grief!' they yelled over her.

Pietrek, the Borynas' farmhand, who was leading the cart since no one else would, walked alongside it, and whenever he got the chance, he'd whisper to her pityingly:

'Not far now ... there'll be vengeance for such an injury ... stick it out ...'

Jagusia, in fetters, lay on the dung, her clothes in rags, shamed eternally, degraded beyond reason and miserable beyond everything. She lay as though neither hearing nor feeling what was happening around her. Only the tears flowed in an endless stream down her bruised face, and her breast heaved sometimes, as though in a petrified cry.

'Hurry up, Pietrek! Faster!' they called repeatedly, as though reason were dawning, and they reached the boundary mounds right under the wood almost at a gallop.

They lifted the cart's boards and threw her down together with the dung like a loathsome carcass so that the earth thudded beneath her. She fell on to her back and did not stir at all. The Voyt's wife set upon her and, giving her a kick, screamed:

'You come back to the village and we'll set the dogs on you!' Picking up some clod or stone, she hurled it at Jagusia with all her might: 'For the injury to my children!'

'For shaming the whole village!' Another hit her.

'May you rot for ever!'

'May the holy earth reject you!'

'May you die of hunger and thirst!'

Shouts, lumps of earth, stones and fistfuls of sand rained down on her, and she lay there like a log, gazing at the trees swaying above her.

The clouds suddenly gathered and a dense heavy rain began to fall.

Pietrek was lingering with the cart, so without waiting for him they began to return in groups, strangely silent. Halfway back they met Dominikowa, hurrying along all bloodied, her clothes torn, weeping, feeling her way clumsily with her stick and, marking who was going past her, she roared in a terrible voice:

'A pestilence on you! Disease on you! May fire and flood not spare you!'

Hunching and ducking their heads, they fled, terrified.

And she rushed with great strides to Jagusia's rescue.

The storm was in full frenzy now, the sky was livid, the dust whirling in great clouds. The poplars bent to the ground with sobs and cries, the winds howled and began to smash more vehemently against the wheat, which dodged in all directions, and, roaring like enraged bulls, they careered into the impenetrable forest, which shook and soughed to high heaven.

Thunderclap followed thunderclap, rolling and booming across the entire countryside, until the ground shook and the cottages trembled. A swirling mass of copper-blue clouds hung low and again and again one of their bulging swollen bellies would split open, a thunderbolt would crash and streams of blinding brightness erupt.

Sometimes a fine hail would shower down, rattling along the leaves and branches.

In the purple murk of dust clouds and hailstones, the trees, bushes and wheat tossed despairingly as though straining to flee, but pummelled by the wind on every side, blinded by lightning, crazed with the booming, they could only whirl and struggle, whistling in the ravaging gale. Somewhere from high above, blue flashes streaked through the clouds, darkness and confusion. Like a shower of fiery snakes, they burst out of nowhere. Hurling haphazardly, blind and dumb as human fate, they flew flickering and adrift, dazzling the whole world. And so the storm continued with brief pauses until evening, and not until dusk did it calm down completely, followed by a quiet, dark and chilly night.

A most beautiful morning dawned the next day. The sky was cloudless and blue as though rinsed clean. The earth shone with dew, the birds sang joyfully and all creatures exulted with delight in the fresh fragrant air.

In Lipce, meanwhile, everything returned to its old life, but as soon as the sun rose two men high, as though by prior agreement everyone began setting off to harvest. From almost every cottage whole bands would sally forth, sickles and scythes flashing from every household and carts rolling out from every farmyard on to the baulks and field tracks.

And by the time the Angelus bell trilled from the church, everyone was standing ready on their patch. On hearing the ringing, and the organ too for those on the nearest fields, they began to say their prayers. Some knelt down and some prayed aloud, while others just sighed piously, gathering strength and purpose as they did so. Each of them then crossed themselves, spat on their palms, planted their feet firmly on the ground, bent their backs and, eagerly grasping their scythes, began to cut and mow.

A great solemn silence descended upon the harvesting fields, as though at a holy service of exhausting, ceaseless and fruitful toil.

The sun rose ever higher. The swelter intensified from hour to hour. A fiery glow flooded the fields and the harvest day rolled on like wheaten gold, ringing like the ripe and heavy golden grain.

The village was left deserted, almost lifeless, the cottages closed up, for everything living that could move from the spot had set off for harvest, even children, even the old and sick. Even the dogs tore at their tethers and trailed from the abandoned homesteads to follow the people. On every field as far as the eye could see, in the scorching heat among the golden rye, in the shimmering dazzling air, from daybreak until late evening, sickles and scythes flashed between streaks of white shirts and red skirts. The people inched along tirelessly, the quiet arduous labour continued and no one was indolent now, nor eyed their neighbour, nor thought of anything else, but worked like oxen, by the sweat of their brow, bent intently over their strips.

Dominikowa's fields alone stood neglected, as though forgotten. Grain was spilling from the ears of rye, crops wilting from the drought, but no one even showed their face. Eyes turned away with anxious sadness and many sighed at the sight. Many scratched their heads worriedly and glanced fearfully at the others before hurriedly applying themselves to their work with even more diligence; it was not the time to mull over such ruin and devastation.

These harvest days now rolled by like steady wheels, glittering with golden spokes of sunlight. Each followed more quickly on the next, each day equally exhausting and equally devoted to hard and joyful labour. And very soon, since the season was perfect and the weather always fine, they began to tie the wheat into thick sheaves, arranging them by the *mendel* in stacks on the strips before slowly carting them back to Lipce.

Now the heavy carts, heaped high, rolled by without pause; they rolled along from every field, along every track, to all the wide-open barns. Loose golden strands spilled in waves over the roads, yards and threshing floors, and were even strewn beside the pond. Beards of golden straw hung from the roadside trees, so that the whole world seemed to smell of wilting hay, grass and fresh grain.

Flails were already beating here and there in the barns, hastily threshing for bread. And in the vast, emptying fields, along the golden stubble, flocks of geese rummaged greedily, sheep and cows were grazing and the first fires were smoking. The rumble of carts echoed all day long, accompanied by joyful shouts, calls and the sound of girls singing, while the happy tanned faces of people glowed in the sun.

And they'd not yet finished the rye when the oats on the sloping ground began to beg for the scythe. The barley was ripening before their very eyes and the wheat deepening to gold, leaving no time to take a breath or even to eat properly. Yet despite the heavy work and such weariness that many a one fell asleep over his bowl of an evening after trailing back from the fields, Lipce fair thrilled with the din of talk and merry laughter, songs and music.

The time of scarcity was past. The barns were full, the grain was abundant and everyone, even the poorest, lifted their heads proudly, looking to the morrow with confidence and brimming with long-awaited, much-desired happiness.

On one such golden harvest day, just after they'd carted back the barley, the blind beggar was passing through the village, led by his dog, but despite the swelter he did not call in anywhere, for he was hurrying to Podlesie. His fat belly and crooked legs hampered him, so he trudged along slowly, sniffing all the while, pricking his ears up alertly and pausing by the reapers. He praised God, offered tobacco, and when a groz or two unexpectedly came his way, he muttered a prayer, but he also deliberately, with seeming indifference, asked about Jagusia and other Lipce matters. He learned but little, however, for they fended him off reluctantly with this and that.

Until finally, when he reached Podlesie, and Mateusz, who was preparing wood a little way off for the blacksmith's windmill, ran across him where he'd stopped to sit by the shrine and catch his breath.

'Show me the way to Szymek's!' the old man requested, hoisting himself up with his crutch.

'You'll not find much comfort there! Nowt but weeping and sorrow!' whispered Mateusz.

'Is Jagusia still ailing? They say something's wrong in her head ...'

'Not true, but she's in bed still and remembers hardly a thing of God's world! Even a stone'd take pity on her! People, ah people ...'

'But to destroy a Christian soul! I hear the old woman accuses the whole village?'

'She'll gain nothing! They all decided, the whole community, they've the right ...'

'It's a terrible thing, the anger of all the people, terrible!' He shuddered to think of it.

'Aye, and stupid and wicked and unjust!' Mateusz burst out. He led the old man right to the cottage, glanced inside himself, but quickly came out, wiping a tear away furtively.

Nastusia was spinning flax by the wall. The old beggar sat beside her and took out a blue flask.

'Here, you must sprinkle this water on Jagusia three times a day and rub her crown, and within a week it'll be like someone lifted the hurt away! The nuns in Przysiów³ gave me this water.'

'God bless you! It's two weeks now and she lies there still with no memory. Sometimes she just starts up like she wants to run away, wailing and calling for Jasio.'

'How is Dominikowa?'

'Like a corpse herself, just sits beside her. They'll not last long, oh no.'

'Jesus, such waste, Jesus! And where's Szymek?'

'Back in Lipce. It's all on his shoulders now, for I must watch 'em both.' She pushed a whole ten kopecks into his hand, but the beggar wouldn't take it.

'I brought her the flask out o' the goodness o' my heart and I'll add a prayer to it at the Transfiguration! She were good to the poor, kind, like few others in this world.'

'True, she had a good heart, it's true! Happen that's why she suffers so much!' Nastusia whispered, gazing over the countryside with sad eyes.

The ringing of the Angelus could be heard from Lipce, along with the fitful rumbling of carts, the clash of sharpening scythes and distant singing, while the whole village and the fields and forest were obscured by the golden dust-cloud of the setting sun.

The old beggar rose, chased off the dogs, adjusted his bags and leaning on his crutch declared:

'Go with God, dear people.'